竹宮ゆゆこ

イラスト◎ヤス

とらドラ! 6



電撃文庫

とらドラ！6

竹宮ゆゆこ

イラスト◎ヤス

暇そうにしている2－Cの皆さん。
もしも生徒会長になったら、
してみたいこと、ありますか？

Q



「暇じゃねえよ、窓の桟に埃が溜まってるから掃除してるんだ。
ったく、窓を開けるごとに校庭の砂埃が入り込んできやがって……
俺が生徒会長になったらこの高須棒を全員に配布し、
授業中休み時間かかわらず、
汚れに気づいた者はただちに
席を立って拭っていいってことにする。
365日24時間、全校生徒が
美化委員ってことだ」

高須竜児



「おっと、気安く触るんじゃねえ。
高須棒は何度も何度も
大事に洗って繰り返し使うんだ。
磨耗して無に帰すまでな」

逢坂大河

「……せいと……かい、ちょう……？」

すいません。起こしちゃいましたね、おやすみなさい。

「……背ぇ、高い……腸……？」

櫛枝実乃梨

「っかー、やっぱこれが一番よく取れるわ。
で、あんだって？　生徒会長ってか？」

はい。どうです？　抱負みたいなの、ありませんか？

Q

「あーるあるある。おっちゃんな、
まず、ジャージでの登下校を自由化しようと思ってんの。
それから部室棟な。臭いが最近全力でヤバイから、
建替えを学校側に要請しちゃうコレ。
遠くから見ると発する臭気で、
ぼわーっと霞みがかって見えることあるもんね。
こないだなんかバレー部の女子が、トイレで便所コオロギに
監禁されたとかって騒ぎに……ぬおっ！
いっ……ってえええー！
うおお、高須棒がずぼっと耳の奥までー！
この櫛枝に牙をむきよったぁ！」

川嶋亜美

「……ん～……そうだなぁ……ん～……ん～と……、
っと！　やっとできたぁ～！
見て見て～、自分でネイルアートしてみたの！　結構うまくない!?
超～～大変だったけど意外とできちゃうもんだねえ！
あ。ここだけちょっと直した方がいいかな？
……そーっと……そーっと……」

あのー、聞こえました？　もしも生徒会長にな

「……っどぅあおらぁ!?
ぎゃあぁぁ亜美ちゃんのネイルがぁぁぁ!
はみ出したじゃねえかテメエさっきから
なんだよしつけえな!?　あー!?」

独身(30)

「えーと、あたしが生徒会長になったら、
まずは生徒の自主性を尊重するために現在の校則の一部を」

ちょっと、困ります。先生は『2－Cの皆さん』じゃないでしょうが。

「どうして!?　サポーターは12人目の青きサムライでしょ!?
担任だって30歳目のクラスメートでいいじゃない！　きー！
……なーんちゃって。冗談ですよ～、笑ってくださ～い。
ウフフフ、おもしろいでしょ？
あたし三十路なのに制服着てるんです。
これ、高校生のコスプレ。
わーおもしろい、笑える、笑え……わ……。
……笑えないよ……！」

高須泰子

「あのお～、やっちゃんがもしも生徒会長になったらぁ、
お勉強をしなくてもよいですかあ～？」

……生徒のお母さんはお帰りください。

「しなくてもよいのぉ～？」

しなくていいから帰ってください。

「やったあ～☆　お勉強しなくていいんだったらあ、
ここは今から毘沙門天国二号店だあ～☆
まずここにビ～ルのサ～バ～置くのぉ！
ビ～ル！　ビ～ル！
そんでカウンタ～がここでえ～、」

高須くーん！　お母さん引き取りに来てー！

「……。」



本命に異変!?　生徒会長選挙編は次ページから！

デザイン◎荻窪裕司

Saturday.

The day long cultural festival was extremely chaotic, courtesy of the crazy antics of the students. Everyone's laughter, tears, excitement, and passion were all inundated into the campfire, as if trying to burn the night sky black.

And then the next day was Sunday.

The job of cleaning up the remains of the disturbance caused by the rowdy students fell to the members of the cultural festival committee members and the student council. They supervised the cleaning up of each class's activities, checking whether the rubbish have been taken out, and also if the ashes of the campfire had been cleared. The student council held a party for the graduating third-years in a corner of the gym to celebrate the success of the cultural festival. The leader of the cultural festival committee asserted that he had no regrets while shedding manly tears, and buried his face in a bouquet of flowers amid wild applause. The student council president, who also clutched a bouquet of flowers in her hands, patted his shoulder, and spoke while dabbing at her hair,

"Oh yes, I have something to say to everyone."

She spoke as if it was nothing important at all.

Chapter 1

"So what happened in the end? Did you accept that huge object?"

"It's part of my job, so I couldn't reject it~. That was extremely annoying, it was *this* big!"

"Though I haven't seen it, it can't be much bigger than *this* right?"

"Nope, Maya, you're too naive. The thing was *THIS* BIG!"

The weirdo, wildly flailing her arms in the air violently, managed to hit the head of someone who was quietly sitting at his desk. A pair of glasses fell onto the desk as a result of the attack, landing with a sharp sound.

"I'm so sorry! It was an accident... Oh, it's only Yuusaku."

The attacker, Kawashima Ami, turned towards the victim, with the guilt in her watery doll-like eyes fading to a coldness, reminiscent of a desert night. The victim, Kitamura Yuusaku, was her childhood friend, so it would've been a waste of time for her to put on her facade of cuteness. Ami sighed lazily and said,

"Alright, I'm really sorry. Here are your glasses."

Regardless, the fact that she had hit someone was the truth, so Ami apologized, albeit rather casually. She intimately put the dropped glasses back onto the bridge of the nose of her childhood friend.

But...

"...Yuusaku?"

"..."

Kitamura, the class representative, student council vice-president, and boy's softball team captain, was an honest and righteous person who loved to be with people, taking part in numerous school and social activities as if he would die if he did not busy himself. The lively Kitamura now had both his eyes and mouth half-open, looking to be in a near-dead state, and probably didn't even notice that he had been hit. His line of sight was not directed at Ami, and he just sat down in his seat without any reaction.

"Hey, Yuusaku, are you alright?"

"Doesn't look good..."

"Hey Maruo! Pull yourself together!"

Kihara Maya poked his cheeks lightly with her finger, but still could not get a reaction from Kitamura. She exchanged a look with Kashii Nanako, who was beside her, while Ami merely shrugged her shoulders in a cute fashion and raised an eyebrow, thinking that they were overreacting. The

abnormal status of her childhood friend didn't seem to be the result of Ami's attack.

"Maruo's burnout sickness seems to be worsening..."

Hearing Nanako's assertion, Ami and Maya nodded in agreement, and lowered their heads to look at the zombie-like Kitamura.

That's right, in the weeks after the end of the exciting cultural festival, all the passion from the festival was gone, and students were forced back into the boredom of normal school lives, with the season also changing unconsciously from the luminous autumn to a black-and-white winter. Thick clouds deprived the world of sunlight, and the orange autumn leaves had turned into dry dead leaves, swirling in the wind on the other side of the gloomy windows. It was almost four in the afternoon and with the day's lessons and cleaning duties already over, only homeroom was left before dismissal. Now was the free time where everyone awaited the arrival of the homeroom teacher. Kitamura's abnormality was hidden by the boredom of everyday life, and had unwittingly permeated his entire body.

The times he opened his mouth to speak decreased, his answers to questions posed by teachers grew rarer, and he was not seen eating anything during lunch break. His zipper would be unzipped at least once every two days, he had a hollow look in his eyes, and his glasses were full of oily fingerprints, which clouded his sight. By the time his friends noticed his abnormal state, he was too far gone to be pulled back into normality.

It couldn't be helped, going back to the mundane and boring everyday life after the lively cultural festival. Kitamura must have been burnt out. Everyone in class 2-C thought so. The blank expression was the result of being burnt out. The untidy fringe that was originally tidy is also the result of being burnt out. Increasing forgetfulness, the increasingly untidy uniform, walking unsteadily along the corridors, and walking straight into walls when in a hurry, all these were signs of being burnt out.

He could be cured if we could get him to turn his attention to everyday-life once again, right? But Kitamura's condition seemed to be rather serious,

as he showed no signs of life, even with three pretty girls surrounding him (Ami, Maya, Nanako). At this time...

"A...Ami..."

"...Wha, What?"

The corpse suddenly spoke. He raised his head to look at the popular model/childhood friend's beautiful face, and stuck out a pair of trembling hands, as though he was an old man who was going to die in five days.

"That's disgusting, go away!"

Ami stepped away from him.

"...When you said 'very big' just now... What was it...? It can't be...some weird job...to have you say big, could it be..."

"Huh?! What are you talking about!? Yuusaku, are you going crazy!?"

"Hahahahahahahahahaha!" Ami laughed madly, and applied a special move she learned from God knows where. The most effective way to shut someone up was a slap, and so the reanimated corpse was slapped in the face. Kitamura slumped to the side without any sign of resistance.

"The big object I was talking about is a dog! A dog! I heard that I had to pose with a bulldog at the photo shoot, so I thought it would be a teddy bear-sized dog, but it was actually a gigantic, two-meter long canine that had to be dragged out on a chain~! The photographer even said, 'This is a pure blood bulldog. Come on, hug it! Don't you think it looks like a llama?' 'It sure looks similar~ It even has the smell of a primitive beast! I don't even know what a llama looks like~!' That's what happened~."

Just what was Maruo going to say after "could it be..."? Barbie doll? Chicken roll? Or could it be... The girls didn't want to find out exactly what he was going to say, so they just whispered disgustedly among themselves. Behind them...

"How's Kitamura... He doesn't look good..."

"Yes, yes," the boys nodded uneasily.

Burnout sickness.

As for Kitamura's abnormal condition, the boys had another interpretation. But they were still the minority, as most people felt that Kitamura was just burnt out. But the extreme interpretation of the minority...

"It's worrying. Just looking at him evokes a strong sympathy."

"I feel the same way... If the rumors are true, just what happened to him?"

"Obviously a whole series of horrific treatments..."

"After all, the opponent is... right?"

"It's really lamentable... To make him burnt out like this to look so haggard."

"Really heart-wrenching... But now that you mention it, where are they?"

* * *

...Takasu-kun, so pitiful...

"!?"

The person turned around at breakneck speed. He heard it, he really heard it. A pair of fierce-looking eyes shot out bolts of lightning in its line of sight, turning to the innocent high school students who were walking past in the corridor during lunch break, and flooring them one by one.

Who was that...?

"No!?"

Or could it be you...

"Ah!"

Or maybe...

"Not me!"

You...

"What are you still dawdling over!?"

"Argh!"

A cold, peppermint-flavored sensation was shoved straight into the deep recesses of his nostril, taking its virginity. Takasu Ryuuji was violently brought down to earth in a wave of pain.

"What are you dilly-dallying for? You're soooooooo slow! Homeroom is about to start! If you have the time to scare people, then you better speed up! You garbage school swimsuit-con perverted dog!"

At the same time the colorful language was uttered, about three centimeters of lip balm was extracted from his nostril. The beautiful and violent girl who was twisting her face in an effort to bring Ryuuji back to reality was none other than Aisaka Taiga, the one everyone referred to as the Palmtop Tiger.

With a face that was as beautiful as a flower full of disdain and her light-colored hair fluttering in the air, her diminutive body gave the impression of an exquisite doll. The widely-acknowledged beauty that was the sum of these special parts now stuck out her chin arrogantly, puffing her flat chest, and struck a familiar pose as she glared at Ryuuji, looking as though she wanted to continue the colorful language.

"It's all because of you ACH~OO!"

Without any prior warning, a mouthful of saliva burst out from Taiga's mouth. Ryuuji didn't even have time to avoid it.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH~!"

A wailing that stemmed from embarrassment now emanated from Taiga's mouth. It was like digging one's own grave, to put it simply, and was her own fault. And to go one step further, it was extremely stupid... The lip balm that was shoved into Ryuuji's nostril a while ago was now lodged deep in Taiga's nostril as a result of her sneeze. Taiga once again started wailing pitifully,

"Hhhhhhhow could th-this kind of ludicrous thing happen to me! Get it out get it out, I can't pull it out!"

Her extreme clumsiness was cause of the introduction of a foreign object into the deep recesses of her nostril. The lady's reputation was in jeopardy!

Although the event happened so quickly, Ryuuji knew it was not the time to laugh.

"Ah, you idiot! You're really stupid! Don't move! I'll help you pull it out now!"

"Arghhhhh!"

Luckily it was just before dismissal time, so the disaster was not witnessed by anyone else. If Taiga had been seen like that, she would surely not be able to survive in society in the future. The red-faced Taiga wildly flailed her limbs around, twisting her body. Ryuuji grabbed Taiga's head and pulled as hard as he could, finally getting the lip balm out of her nostril.

Pop! Taiga was finally free of the peppermint attack on her mucous membrane, but was still rubbing her nose furiously at the pain, leaning onto the wall for support, with her tears sticking onto her long eyelashes. Taiga naturally had a serious case of rhinitis and a sensitive physique, so contact with the lip balm would probably have been too provocative.

"Taiga! Pull yourself together! Anyway, didn't you do the same thing to me just now? It's divine justice, to tell you that you shouldn't do such weird things to me in the future..."

The low grumbling was also for her own good, but Taiga's wet eyes glared fiercely at Ryuuji,

"It went deeper into my nostril than yours, and my nostril is also much smaller! It's completely different from your wide and loose black hole!"

"Oh..."

Ryuuji had nothing to say about that, and could only keep silent. In front of him...

"...Nose, my nostril...so cold..."

"Don't pick your nose! It's revolting!"

Taiga, who was distracted by her stinging nose, was making extremely unlady-like actions, sticking her finger a few centimeters into her nostril.

"..."

Ryuuji moved to stop her hand, but Taiga's movement suddenly stopped, staring at the lip balm that was in Ryuuji's hand. The glossy texture of the lip balm that was pulled out from two different nostrils now appeared to be even more polished. Taiga stared at the lip balm while still holding on to its cover, her face revealing a minute and indescribable expression. She bit her lips tightly, and raised her head to look at Ryuuji. Ryuuji thought she wanted her lip balm back, so he passed it onto her hands. But Taiga still kept quiet, her eyes darting between lip balm in her hand and Ryuuji's nose. Just when Ryuuji was wondering what she was going to say...

"I think it'll take an inhuman amount of courage to apply this thing to my lips once again... It can't be used anymore... I should throw it away..."

Ryuuji's triangular eyes immediately flashed blue, not because his innate abilities were awakened, granting him the ability to kill with sight, but

because of Taiga! Because of the environment! Because of the education of the masses!

"I won't allow you to throw it away! It's too wasteful!"

It's too wasteful! Too wasteful! The phrase resonated in Ryuuji's mind with a scorching rhythm. *Dongdongdongdong,dongdongdongdong, it's such a waste, it's such a waste, dongdongdongdong, it's so wasteful!* Ryuuji's all-time favorite phase: "It's such a waste!"! The vegetable leftovers from cooking, "It's such a waste"! Vegetables leftovers should be mixed with shredded burdock roots and eaten! The flier with a blank side on the back, "It's such a waste"! The paper used for advertisement fliers make the best scrap paper! Everything that is thrown away before its functions are fully utilized, "It's such a waste!" "Never ask for plastic bags!"

Taking into account the statements above, how could it be possible for Ryuuji to condone Taiga's act of throwing away a sparkling new lip balm just because it went into someone's nose? That would be tantamount to selling his soul to the devil. This is the responsibility of humans, the only species born on Earth to possess sentient intelligence.

But...

"I'm never going to use it! The surface is coated with the insides of your nose!"

Taiga obviously did not appreciate the tremendous responsibility of humans to respect to all lifeforms on earth. *Let me enlighten you!* Ryuuji spoke at a deliberately slow speed,

"It's alright. The deposits from my nostril are already in your nostril, so the layer on the lip balm is actually your own nasal secretions."

"Argh!!!"

Although it was the truth, Taiga howled like a steam whistle, furiously rubbing her nose with her jacket sleeve as if her life depended on it - though it was too late to rectify anything.

"The dirty things from your nose are in my nose... I've been corrupted! It's incurable!"

"That's rude! Didn't you spark this whole chain of unfortunate events in the first place? Alright, just cap the lip balm properly. Bear the responsibility to use it until the day its time is up. Here, wipe it with a tissue."

"Do you seriously think that it'll be alright after wiping it with a tissue!? I'll give this to you! No room for negotiation!"

"I don't want it! Except for mentum, men don't use lip balm anyway!"

"Why not! Didn't you say 'what a waste'? Couldn't your mouth accept anything and everything? You meddling, perverted dog! Amazing isn't it, Ryuuji isn't the town's 'It's such a waste' ambassador for nothing!"

No matter how much of a waste, who would want a lip balm that has been shoved into the nostrils of two different people? There would still be room for negotiation if she used a penknife to shave off the affected portions, but it would be impossible for Taiga to do something like this. She would only watch as the nasal secretions take over the lip balm. Ryuuji quickly turned around to reject the present, and just as expected...

"Don't be shy! Come! Apply it on your lips! Don't you always complain about your dry lips?"

"I don't want it! St-Stop it! Go, go away, that's so dirty... Argh... It tastes salty..."

...Takasu-kun is too pitiful...

"!"

The voice was clearer just now, and came from behind Taiga, who was preparing to apply the lip balm onto Ryuuji's lips. It must have been a reaction to the image of intimacy painted by the single-hand grip that Taiga had on Ryuuji's neck, and Ryuuji's ultimately futile resistance.

Just where did it come from?

White flames sprouted from Ryuuji's cursed eyes, looking for the owner of that voice. Taiga saw the opening and continued to apply the dirtied lip balm onto Ryuuji's lips. But Ryuuji didn't care about it anymore (Since it had been applied on his lips once, it wouldn't make much of a difference if more was applied).

The problem now was the voice that Ryuuji heard. It wasn't an isolated opinion, for he had been constantly hearing such whispers for the past few weeks...

Regardless of the time and place, in toilets all over the school, on his way to and from the classroom, sometimes at the rubbish dump during cleaning time, and also just now when he was walking with Taiga in the corridor.

Those people would start whispering "Takasu-kun is so pitiful" whenever they saw Ryuuji.

Although he gave all that he had for the Palmtop Tiger during the cultural festival, he still lost to the glasses boy from the student council. Even though he was rejected, he's still so devoted to her...

Even though he was rejected.

"Bastards...! Who's the one spreading such rumors...!"

An irritated Ryuuji threw off the baggage that was Taiga, his eyes flashing as if foretelling the fall of an empire, shooting menacing glares at everyone around him. He didn't notice that a first-year girl 200 meters away fell unconscious as if hit by an inter-continental ballistic missile. Taiga didn't notice it either, as she shrugged her shoulders like a westerner, happily shaking her head while saying,

"'Spreading such rumors' is referring to *that* rumor right? Yes yes, that's really bothersome, I've also heard that low-level rumor flying around..."

Not realizing that she was grinning like a Cheshire cat, which gave her milky complexion a rosy tinge, Taiga continued,

"Right... How did it go again? Me, who was chosen as the campus queen, abandoned Ryuuji who won the competition for me for a re-re-re-relationship with Kitamura-kun, right? I heard that it was something like this, or maybe not... Most probably right... It's rather annoying isn't it..."

Taiga grinned even wider... Although she referred to it as a low-level rumor, it was obvious that Taiga was extremely happy with regards to the contents of the rumor. Looking at Taiga's happy face that was bordering on euphoria, Ryuuji started to suspect whether Taiga was the source of that particular rumor. He immediately dismissed this suspicion though, as an idiot like Taiga couldn't be smart enough to spread rumors about herself in school.

That's right, this particular rumor has become the hottest topic of discussion for the bored student population. The rumor transcended class and grade boundaries, and was swiftly exchanged between the members of the student population.

Of course this wasn't the truth. Taiga wasn't romantically involved with Kitamura. Her desire was totally ignored.

At the campfire during the cultural festival, Taiga did accept Kitamura's request for a dance, something that Ryuuji also witnessed. It was a beautiful portrait, but beautiful things are always short-lived, as the two of them soon pulled Ryuuji, Minori and Ami in with their usual rowdiness, so there was no sign of a "romantic relationship". To Ryuuji, the most annoying aspect of the rumor was not the misinterpretation of the situation by the student population, but the "Takasu-kun did so much in the competition, but was still abandoned". Ryuuji was unable to dismiss such a misunderstanding. It was true that he gave his all in the competition to cheer Taiga up, and won the competition together with Minori after surpassing numerous obstacles, but instead of reinforcing his manly

reputation, Ryuuji was now the pitiful "But he gave his all..." guy. The whole misunderstanding stemmed from the everyone's perception that Taiga and Ryuuji *were* in a romantic relationship, and by the time Ryuuji actually noticed it, it had become the truth in the minds of his schoolmates, which is why the rumor about Taiga abandoning Ryuuji, Taiga being stolen by Kitamura, and Ryuuji becoming the poor abandoned dog came about.

Why is it like this? When did it become like this?

"Damn... You're actually so happy about it... Don't you feel extremely irritated to be misunderstood to be in a relationship with me!?"

"Hmm~ You're right..."

The one who had the fear-inducing title of the "Palmtop Tiger", was smiling broadly and showed no hint of annoyance for some reason.

"They actually said that I'm the ex-girlfriend of a dog, conflicting feelings...but I'm human... Seems like I abandoned you right? What's important is "now", everything with you is in the past already..."

Taiga went "Fu!", and continued,

"But you're really rather pitiful, it must be really depressing to be abandoned by me right? You gave so much for me but didn't get anything in return. My heart has already been stolen by Kitamura-kun... Fufufu!"

She laughed uncontrollably, still looking at Ryuuji while cooing in a soft voice, "So pitiful~"

"Taiga... You..."

"Alright, let's stop talking about this and go. We have to get to class before the single woman gets there. Hahaha!"

Damn!

Ryuuji was now extremely offended by the gleeful Taiga who was happily bouncing along in front of him. To be rumored to be in a relationship with your crush - anyone would be extremely pleased with such a rumor. But the other protagonist of the rumor, Ryuuji, was now famous as the "School's Top Abandoned Guy". In comparison, to be misunderstood as the "scary delinquent" would have been better than being pointed at and pitied by the people who aren't even associated with him. "That's Takasu, the abandoned guy, so pitiful..."

Glaring at Taiga, who was in an extremely good mood, Ryuuji's feelings of displeasure intensified. Although he couldn't kill the hated person in front of him, he could still use his fingers to flick her undefended hairpin. Strike the blow! Ryuuji quietly moved nearer to Taiga...

"Look! There! The photo board! Lucky! No one's here! We can pick the ones we want without any restrictions!"

The sixth-sense of Taiga, who turned around, was on par with that of wild animals. Ryuuji quickly retracted his outstretched hand.

"Let's go! Quickly!"

Looking at Taiga's anxious expression, Ryuuji's displeasure dissipated.

Snapping back to reality, Ryuuji could only shrug his shoulders at Taiga's familiar expression, as she looked like a kid when she moved her short legs quickly to speed up her walking speed.

As for Ryuuji's displeasure, the rumor was unforgivable. But... it wasn't like he could do anything about it.

Ryuuji felt his displeasure changing into gentleness, the warm feeling welling up in him - that was the extent of his displeasure. He was just like an overcooked egg tart, melting at any opportunity. The result was that Ryuuji was gentle to everyone around him. There were times where even he was unable to accept such a character, but what could he do? He would feel happy whenever he saw Taiga's familiar arrogance and impulsiveness.

At that time...

When Ryuuji received the message from Taiga's father and saw the expression of Taiga who understood everything, he thought that he would never be able to experience the "normal life" ever again.

He expected that everything was destroyed, finished, and Ryuuji, whose mind was full of such thoughts, was extremely afraid, and very sad.

But right now, the world was still operating normally, the earth was still orbiting as it should, every morning and night came on time, and the light sounds of Taiga's running still echoed.

Ryuuji rubbed his numb nose, following Taiga's lead. Nothing has changed, everyday still progressed as it should.

Yes, the events of "that day" did not leave any scars on Taiga's tough heart. "You deserve it..." Ryuuji didn't direct this at anyone. Taiga hasn't changed, as she was still the tigress that reigned as queen, one that no one, not even her father could vanquish...

"Hurry up! You servant! COME!"

"..."

Taiga acted like she was calling a well-trained dog, and how would you expect me to take this insult lying down - but that's another question altogether.

Something which must be done after school.

"Let me see... Ah! I found Kitamura-kun! Ryuuji, look, it's him right?"

"Isn't that a bit too small... He's rolling his eyes... You still want that?"

"I want it! I want every photo taken of Kitamura-kun! Number 53... Heh heh, this is the fourth one."

The photos that were posted on the board were all taken by the photography club. They had set up a display board in the corridor outside the club rooms, and also numbered the photos. On a side note, the members of the photography club were attacked last year by an unknown person and the club was almost closed down. Furthermore, only girls were allowed to join from this year onwards. Only a few people knew the reason, but it was rumored to have something to do with the illegal selling of female student swimsuit photos. Students could purchase the photos at a price of 10 yen each from the newly-established female photography club. Everyone could find and take down the number of the photos they wanted, then write down their class and student number along with the payment in an envelope and put it into the box in front of the club rooms. The photos would be sent to the classes in a few days. With the relatively anonymous ordering system, the teenage boys and girls in the midst of puberty would of course not buy only photos of themselves.

"Ah, Ryuuji, here! There's one with Minorin in it!"

"Where, where!?"

"She's wearing her bald cap! This is a must-buy!"

Taiga took down the numbers of the photos with Kitamura in it, while Ryuuji did the same with the photos that had Minori in them. Just like most of the student population, they took advantage of the system to legally obtain pictures of their crush. No matter how widespread digital cameras and cellphones have become among high school students, this tradition probably would not vanish for the foreseeable future.

The photos on the display board were all taken during the cultural festival a while ago. Juniors posing in front of the decorated classrooms, maids who were accosting customers outside the maid cafes, couples making funny faces, the wind band performing intently. *The picture of a conversation carried out in Greek costumes, that should be the drama club's performance right?* There were also planning committee members who were engaged in discussion along the corridors, the students in

charge of maintaining order shouting through loudspeakers; the other display board had a few group photos of the individual class activities, and the individual photos of the participants of the beauty pageant. There was a picture of Taiga with her angel wings, and Haruta jumping up and down clutching the prize in his hands. The photo next to it was one of Ami laughing. There was also a facial close-up of the contest participants (Ryuuji's face was coincidentally blocked by other contestants, looking like a deliberate setup by the photography club. There was even a special section set up for Ami, with the photo of her mistress and whip get-up given special attention, adding an exotic tinge to the wholesome public high school corridor.

There were smiles all around under the bright colors of the photos, reconstructing the events of that day in the 2D frame.

"There sure are a lot..."

"The student council members have got at least a picture each. And what's the big deal about the special section for that stupid chihuahua? It's revolting... There are quite a few photos of myself too, though I don't really want to buy my own photos. But the beauty pageant... Would it better to buy it?"

"Just buy it as a memento. I'll buy one to show Yasuko."

"Since you want to buy my photos, I won't need to buy them myself, it'll be a waste of money~!"

"You're actually quibbling over such minute details..."

"Memories trump pictures."

"Priceless..."

Taiga crouched down to take a look at the photos pasted on the lower end of the display board. Ryuuji, who lowered his head to look at Taiga, still felt the peppermint-flavored lip balm's presence in his nostril.

Although the cultural festival was only a few weeks ago, looking at the miniature representations of that day evoked a feeling of nostalgia. The wrestling match that the class put up, Taiga's beauty pageant, and also the competition... There sure were a lot of hardships. But the thought that is "It was happy" and the sadness that "It ended" fused into a funny feeling, embodied by the cold peppermint air that flowed out of Ryuuji's nose. A lot happened on that day - he even argued with Minori. A lot of happy, sad and thought-provoking events happened that day. The emotional pair of triangular eyes turned to a photo and stopped.

"Hey! Taiga! Look at this photo!"

Hearing Ryuuji's voice, Taiga followed his line of sight and was left breathless, her shoulders slightly shaking.

That was a photo of the campfire night.

Within the few square centimeters of square frame, the angel with a crown on her head, held hands with and exchanged smiles with the bespectacled student council vice-president. The light from the campfire illuminated the sides of their faces and the two of them looked as if they only had eyes for each other, as if... just like in the rumor, the two of them looked like a couple in love.

Ryuuji gave his honest assertion of the photo,

"This photo...is really good..."

Taiga didn't answer.

She didn't respond at all, and just smiled as she continued staring at the photo. Although Ryuuji was close enough to catch the sweet scent of Taiga's hair, he didn't know what she was thinking about. All he knew was that Taiga's gaze towards the the photo was unwavering, and that her fingers were extremely white.

Taiga finally nodded as if accepting something momentous, and took down the number of the photo. Suddenly, she twisted her face to the side.

"Fu!"

She released the breath that she was holding,

"Fu...hahahahahahahaha! I can't take it anymore! What is this! Exorcism?"

"Huh...?"

The romantic atmosphere was immediately shattered, as Taiga's laughter was like a machine gun with unlimited ammo, relentlessly shooting at everyone who heard it, with her finger still pointing at a nearby photo. *What is it?* Ryuuji walked closer to take a look...

"H-how mean..."

"Right, it's really mean, what's this face about!? Are you acting cool!?"

"No! I'm saying that you're too mean!"

Ryuuji hugged his head and groaned. *Taiga's too mean. She's actually laughing at my face!* She laughed uncontrollably as she pointed at the photo, which was of Ryuuji during the competition before the campfire. To tell the truth, the face that was captured on camera was indeed rather horrifying, because as a result of the breathlessness caused by Ryuuji's full-blown running, his already scary face had become even more twisted, turning into a face that would scare the pants off even the ugliest of ghosts, and this horrifying face looked as though it was hunting Minori, who was running in front of him. Even Ryuuji himself had to admire the photography club for their courage in posting this photo.

That is because I was at my limit! There was no time to consider my facial expression as I only thought about running as fast as I could for Taiga, and yet...

"Who do you think I made that expression for!? For you..."

"Yes, yes thank you very much..."

Taiga's placed her finger on her cheek, opened her eyes to their greatest capacity and looked upwards...

"La!"

And stuck out her tongue at Ryuuji, after which she turned back to the display board.

"...!"

The abandoned Ryuuji had nothing to say to that.

Could anyone teach me the method to hurt people with three simple actions? Ryuuji clutched his heart and sank to the ground. It's useless to retort! That person is unreasonable!

"Olaolaolaolaolaolaolaolaolaolaola!"

"Gah!?"

Ryuuji could only move away and turn around in response to the sudden increase in air pressure.

"Oh..."

"Ola...ah!? Takasu-kun, why are you sitting here!? ...Could it be because of my 'Ola'!?"

"Ah, no, not that! I'm just a little hurt mentally..."

The girl hesitantly looked down at her own fists, while Ryuuji quickly shook his hands at her, trying to telling her "It's alright, don't be nervous."

"Is it? Then that's good." The girl who nodded seriously in response is none other than Kushieda Minori.

She smiled at Ryuuji, who felt infinitely blessed.

The crush on her started in his first year. They became classmates when they were promoted to year two, became friends at the end of spring, went

on a trip together in the summer, and got an insight into her inner world. In autumn, her actions became even more weird, and the unspoken distance between them made Ryuuji uncomfortable. The two of them even argued. In the end though, the two of them smiled at each other under the starry sky, forgiving each other for past offenses. Then...

"Takasu-kun's also here to pick photographs? What a coincidence."

"Yup."

And it is winter now.

"Has Takasu-kun chosen a lot of photos?"

"Just a few."

"I see."

Minori spoke facing the photo, showing the side of her face to Ryuuji, her body wobbling lightly. Her capering hair almost touching Ryuuji's shoulder, to which she whispered "drunken fists". That was the kind of girl she was, that is, Ryuuji's longtime crush. More simple than anyone, and yet more complex. As brilliant as the sun, an astonishing life form. As for the "Ola", it was merely a way for her to remember the photo numbers.

"Ah, Minorin!!!"

"Hello!!! Taiga!!!"

The voice of the cute animal trainer came from the other side of the display board, so the crouching Taiga moved beneath the display board, happily shouting from below. Minori also crouched down in response, and thus the pair of best friends met in a toilet bowl squatting position. *What are the two of you doing...* They were totally ignoring Ryuuji's blank stare.

"I found Minorin's photo, number 81. It's very cute!"

"Number 81 right... Got it. Listen up, I have something to tell Taiga too. Look at number 200, Ami's photo. Hint is 'lower-part-of-the-breast'."

"!?"

Ryuuji's head snapped back to search for the photo in question. Number 200! Which one is it? Even if he wasn't romantically interested in Ami, there was no high school male in the world who wouldn't want to confirm with their own eyes after hearing that kind of hint! Everyone together! "It's such a waste~!"

"I really can't stand this perverted dog..."

"Ah! Wh-What am I doing..."

Taiga's icy tone brought Ryuuji back to reality. *Right, Minori's here too, can't do anything embarrassing.* Ryuuji quickly composed himself and nonchalantly took down number 200 in his order form. Although he took great care not to be found out, Taiga, who had been observing him the whole time, sighed loudly to the display board,

"Seriously, Ryuuji's sexual urges have already gone over the threshold of tolerance, I feel like killing him..."

"Really gone over... Hey!"

"If you're really that interested in stupid chihuahua's lower breast, then I'll tell you about it. There are... six on her breasts! I saw it with my own eyes!"

"There aren't."

Ryuuji's response was too straightforward, and Taiga scoffed at him, violently flourishing her hair, which was almost touching the ground, "Ah...so boring. I have no time to discuss Ryuuji's sexual urges. You can go fantasize in front of stupid chihuahua's breasts... I feel like going to the toilet. I'll go to the toilet, and then back to class."

"So that kind of position would make someone want to go to the toilet..."

In response to the nodding Ryuuji, Taiga retorted, "I don't have time to talk about perverted things", and disappeared from his sight.

"Taiga's going to the toilet? Do you want me to go with you?"

"It's alright, I'll go by myself."

Minori was still in her squatting position, looking at Taiga's indoor shoe-clad feet swiftly disappearing from sight. "She rejected my company..." Minori could only stand up now that she was the only one in the squatting position,

"She actually ran away from me. And Taiga even passed on a horrible thing to me. Now I feel the urge to go to the bathroom too..."

Ryuuji tried to replay her words in his head, and peered down at her, speechless. Minori seemed to feel his gaze, and as their eyes met

...

"NO!!!"

Minori spun like a top, her face extremely red after one round of spinning.

"Di-Did I just say something embarrassing? Argh~ That's so embarrassing! But I shall use my powers to break free of this encirclement! Come, Takasu-kun! The destined conflict! Hoohahaha! It's Minori's round! Draw the card!"

It was as if she was trying to hide something (it was far too late), as Minori exaggeratedly flourished her photo order form in front of Ryuuji.

"Erm..."

"Dong... I sacrifice 90 yen to summon 9 photos! Fast magic 'spotlight' activated! Spotted number 25, the photo taken with softball juniors, summoned after paying 10 yen! End turn with a defensive formation on the battlefield! Alright, it's Takasu's turn!"

"Hu-Huh...?"

"Move quickly, if not it'll always be Kushieda's turn!"

"Hu-Hu-Huh?"

"Sigh... You're too slow! Stop stating the obvious! Aren't we exchanging each others order form to see what photos the other has ordered?"

Although Ryuuji was happy that the hand holding the order form was swatted, it didn't show on his face.

"We are? You're really good... I couldn't understand what you were talking about at all..."

"You're joking again! Anyway, so how? What have you ordered? The class photo would obviously be summoned in the aggressive stance right? Let me see, let me see!"

"The photos I bought are... My turn, my turn."

Just as Ryuuji was preparing to hand his order form over to Minori... *Wait! How could she see the order form?* Ryuuji finally realized that something was wrong, and froze. *It's not the time to laugh, it's my turn now.*

"Mm? What's wrong?"

"Ah, no...noth-... Gah..."

"That's weird... Is there a problem with your card arrangement? I'll help you look..."

"No need!"

"...That's even more suspicious."

Minori craned her neck towards Ryuuji to peek at his order form, while Ryuuji frantically tried to keep the contents from her prying eyes. *If she sees that the order form is filled with the numbers of the photos with her in it, my turn will end in an explosion and I'll lose the game (even though I'm not familiar with the rules).* To prevent that from happening, Ryuuji planned to nonchalantly slip the order form into his back-pocket.

"Hey! What's with that photo!?"

Ryuuji pointed at a random photo, immediately distracting the cat-like reflexes of Minori, who immediately turned to the photo.

"Very good! Would the follow-up be the spirit photo attack!?"

Ryuuji took the chance to stuff the order form into his pocket, and prepared to say "It's about time to get back to class" to add on to his previous attack so as to end the game. However...

"Ah! Th-This photo is..."

Minori's voice sounded uncharacteristically hesitant.

"There's also a photo of the competition..."

Ryuuji, who was standing beside Minori, also raised his head to look at that photo.

It wasn't the horrific photo that Taiga was laughing at, but another photo from the competition, specifically, from the moment Ryuuji and Minori crossed the finish line. Ryuuji's chest touched the tape at the finish line while carrying a look of utter desperation, while beside him, Minori twisted her face as though she was crying while flailing her limbs. At the crucial moment, Ryuuji and Minori overtook the other contestants and got to the finish line at the same time. With their gym top sleeves in a mess, the two of them held each others hand tightly.

Both their expressions were as terrifying, but the two of them would never forget the warmth of the other's fingers. They would surely remember it for life. No matter how much time passed, no matter what kind of boring adult they became, they would surely be able to feel that warmth in their hands.

"...It's my turn again."



Minori suddenly lowered her head and spoke. She took out her order form again, and used a mechanical pencil to add a number to the form. Hiding her face from Ryuuji, she carefully folded the order form up, while saying in a small voice,

"Say... Takasu-kun..."

Then in a louder voice...

"I want to buy this photo. Do you want to buy it together as a memento?"

...Ryuuji was shocked.

Blood was pounding in his ears, and his heartbeat was rapidly rising.

"Oh...alright."

Minori asked if I wanted to buy it together with her. She said she wanted to buy the photo together, so as to remember the moment that is more important than everything else to me! If you don't get excited after hearing that, then you're not a living man.

"...Alright. Let's buy it together."

Ryuuji stammered, nodding furiously at the same time. *So happy, so happy.* His flushed face looked as if it was about to shoot fire. Minori lowered her head to count the change she took out from her pocket, the side of her face too brilliant for anyone to be able to look at her directly.

* * *

"Please sit down~ Homeroom starts now~"

With the *Thump!* of her footsteps, the thirty year-old single woman (Class teacher, Koigakubo Yuri) appeared at the podium. At the end of a day's

work, her makeup was still largely intact, though her chin was slightly oily, and her pleasant smile to the students also showed that she was a "dedicated teacher". She had recently cut her hair, resulting in a much tidier and cleaner appearance, though this could have been a result of her losing weight.

The fitted white jacket and knee-length skirt fit her body nicely, while the pink-gold necklace accentuated her skin tone, as the single diamond on the necklace brought out a low-profile feminine charm. She wore an Omega watch on her delicate wrist, steadily reflecting the time of the day. Her outfit wasn't overly flashy, managing to maintain the feel of a teacher, and thus the single woman finally succeeded in breaking free of the boring fashion trend of the teachers. After turning thirty, the single woman was heading towards becoming a pile of dead ash, but "a woman's fighting will" once again reared its head, rising up from the fire that was "aging", like a phoenix to spread her wings.

The students were totally unaware of what had happened to the single woman, but...

"Alright, everyone sit down~ Stop talking~"

Even though she was trying her best to spread her wings, it's never easy to pull healthy second-year high school students from their lively conversations.

The students were still running around and making noise, with less than half of the class seated properly.

"Don't be too rowdy~"

Whack!

At the same time as the veins on the single woman's forehead bulged, the time space of the classroom was dramatically altered.

"Huh!?"

"My ears hurt..."

The weaker students suddenly stumbled, covering their ears.

"Get into your seats... I must leave school early today... Someone's going to matchmake me. Thirty-four years old, university professor, second son in the family, owns land, and is looking to get married. His parents are both teachers, so they want their son to marry a teacher too. I've also heard that they're already living together with the eldest son. Miracle, it's really a miracle match. Even though we've only exchanged e-mails four times, we get along surprisingly well. So we're going to watch a movie today! Then eat dinner! Then according to the situation and atmosphere...! For today, for today, I... I'll...!"

BamBamBamBamBamBamBamBamBamBamBamBamBamBamBamBamBam!

An overpowering aura originating from the podium suddenly made known its presence. "What's this unnatural pressure I'm feeling!?" "I suddenly feel terrified!" The originally rowdy 2-C students were seated in two seconds flat. *Very good. It's not like I don't have leadership qualities!* The single woman used her fingers to fix her slightly messy hair, and her face once again revealed the gentle smile of a teacher.

"Che..."

An irritated sound immediately froze the single woman in her tracks. A thorn-like gaze and the sound came from the center of the classroom at the same time. Twisting her face in annoyance, the Palmtop Tiger glared at the single woman. The female delinquent with the nickname of "tiger" stared at the single woman who was attempting to speed things up for personal reasons with unmasked displeasure.

But the single woman who would have already admitted defeat on a normal day was different today. She closed her mouth to return Taiga's glare, and stood straight up on her 6 centimeter high heels on the hard earth, rather, the classroom floor.

"I, I won't lose today! There'll be a high school class gathering that's held once every five years next month... Even if I can't get married in time, I must at least get a boyfriend by then! Class Representative! Please shout your orders~!!"

But the single woman's request was not met with the expected answer.

It's here again. The class of 2-C whispered among themselves, and the single woman frowned in confusion. Of course, Ryuuji was also confused as well. This has been going on for a while. His feral eyes turned to his zoned-out friend, not because he was angered by his friend's inanimation and wanted to give him a critical hit to the throat, but because he was worried.

"Class representative! Kitamura-kun! Hey~!"

"Ah... Ah..."

The single woman called a few times before Kitamura, the class representative, opened his eyes. The untidy fringe, together with his hunched back, seemed to reflect his uneasiness to such a movement.

"...Stand. Bow. Thank you for the hard work..."

He sat back onto the chair. No one followed his actions, they only looked at him with worried eyes. Taiga also turned around, looking worriedly at Kitamura's blank face. The burnout sickness that her crush had contracted made her extremely worried, so she didn't notice the few glances that were being cast her way.

"The Palmtop Tiger is really a scary woman..."

"What kind of relationship can they have to make a man into such a state...?"

This is the exaggerated portion of the rumor. Some people secretly say that "Kitamura doesn't have burn out sickness. It's because he's worn out by the Palmtop Tiger's exhausting demands." "To tear Kitamura into a

shell of a man, and to restart her relationship with the Takasu that she abandoned, she's really a horrifying female tiger, to toy with two men so cruelly!" ...This is the content of what a small portion of the students who believe the rumors think.

The students, who each seemed to have their own explanation of Kitamura's condition exchanged awkward glances, while the single woman in front of them forced a smile. How could she waste time at such a place! The professor would be at the fountain in front of the cinema in thirty minutes! The class reunion in a month! Cousin's child is going to school next year! Forty years-old in ten years!

"Al-Alright! Even though a lot has happened, everyone please face such problems with vigor!"

The single woman still had a smile on her face as she tentatively looked at the unhelpful corpse of the former class representative. The corpse wore its usual blank expression, looking out of the window blankly. Although the single woman was in a hurry to go on her date, she was still worried about the corpse.

"Tomorrow's Friday, the last school day of the week! After the rest days would be the widely anticipated...it is right? Yes, the student council president elections! Kitamura-kun! You have to work hard for it! You're the best candidate for the next student council president... No, you're the only candidate!"

Upon hearing the single woman's words, whispering broke out among the students. To be honest, no one was really anticipating the elections, but...

"Oh right, it's the elections soon! An activity!"

"It's already this time? Time sure flies!"

"The next student council president will obviously be Kitamura!"

The students of 2-C broke out in applause, joined by the single woman, awkwardly making enough noise so as to breathe some signs of life back

into the corpse. As long as there's a new activity, the corpse named Kitamura should be cured of his burnout sickness. Then he'll start to come back to life and fight to be the next student council president.

Ryuuji also deliberately applauded loudly, exchanging looks with Noto and Haruta,

"Hey, Kitamura, work hard! We'll of course help in your campaign!"

"Great, let's have a roaring campaign! Right, Kitamura!"

"Do you want another wrestling match? I could write the script for you?"

"Ahaha! Haruta is such an idiot! Who would put up a wrestling match in an election campaign!?"

"I'm an idiot?"

"Yeah! I'm not stupid! You're extremely stupid! "

"Right? Kitamura, you'll be bothered by such a campaign method right?"

"Right?"

"Elec....."

Wham! A exultant classmate smacked Kitamura on the back, and Kitamura seemed to say something.

"Hmm? What? What's wrong? Kitamura?"

"Elec....."

"Yes~? What's the problem, class representative?"

"What are you saying? I can't hear you properly. Anyway you should dismiss the class first right?"

The single woman hurried him for personal reasons.

Bam!

The corpse kicked his chair and stood up.

The sound of the chair falling could even be heard from downstairs. This occurrence happened too quickly, and left everyone staring at the corpse in disbelief. The single woman's smile froze, Ryuuji, Noto, Haruta and Taiga also stiffened. Even Ami stopped working on her nails, turning to look at her childhood friend who had just returned from the gates of hell with wide eyes. The whole class had stopped moving.

"I'm not running for student council president...and I'm quitting the student council... I'm not going to do it, I'm going to quit everything, I'm not going to continue, I'm going to quit-not-going-to-do-it-not-going-to-continue-not-going-to-continue! I'm already, already, already..."

The long awaited voice of Kitamura resounded clearly in the classroom,

"I'm giving up on everything!!!!!!"

Chapter 2

"Will Kitamura-kun come to school today? Or will he be absent..."

It was Friday morning, which raised the level of anticipation for the weekend.

Under the thick clouds in the sky, Taiga hunched her shoulders with her hands in the pockets of her jacket. The cold wind that signaled the transition from the end of autumn to the beginning of winter made Taiga's feathery hair flutter softly in the air.

"It's too cold. The weather suddenly became much colder today, and now it's not enough to just wear a jacket and a sweater... I guess we should start wearing our winter coats."

"It's only November, we shouldn't need to take them out yet. You're just more sensitive to the cold."

"You've also wrapped yourself quite tightly, looking so warm... Uguu, I'm freezing."

"It's still too early to start wearing winter coats, but it's just the right time to wear a scarf."

Ryuuji, who was walking behind Taiga, already had a scarf wrapped around his neck. This is the difference of gathering information! Ryuuji's triangular eyes conveyed a sense of superiority. The weather report in the morning had already predicted that the weather today would be rather cold, so Ryuuji took out the scarf that he had washed a few days before in anticipation of the weather and wore it.

"If you wore a winter coat now, then what will you be wearing when winter comes? Anyway, I messaged Kitamura the moment I got up this morning, but he didn't reply..."

"Oh..."

The two were going to school by the usual sakura tree-lined street, stepping on dead leaves scattered on the ground.

After Ryuuji took a futile look at his cellphone to check for new messages, he placed it into his pocket, and unwrapped his scarf to wrap it around Taiga's neck from behind. "Gah!" Taiga stopped in her tracks. A chance, to take advantage of the situation by strangling the arrogant Taiga, and then setting it up to seem as though she froze to death...was what the situation looked like, but Ryuuji's gentle hands lightly wrapped his scarf around Taiga's neck without compromising her ability to breathe. But the men's scarf was much too long for the small Taiga, leaving a long length of the scarf still hanging behind her back even after winding it around her neck 3 times.

"Gu, gu..."

"Wait, don't move! It'll be bad if it gets caught on a passing car... Alright!"

The tail that had hung behind behind Taiga's back was now tied into a ball by Ryuuji. Ryuuji patted the finished knot, signaling to the waiting Taiga to start walking forward, a smile revealing itself on her beautiful face.

"Ah~ It's so warm... Revived..."

She was just like a middle-aged woman who'd just lowered herself into a hot spring. "Heh heh heh!" Ryuuji's demonic eyes gleamed an unnatural sparkle, his happy emotions showing on his face,

"That's a cashmere scarf, it costs as much as Yasuko's salary. I got it for Christmas two years ago. It's soft isn't it?"

"Oh, cashmere... Sacrificing the lives of innocent rabbits..."

"It's not rabbits right... Isn't it goats...?"

"I was under the impression that it was rabbits...?"

"Well, whatever."

Taiga rubbed the scarf that still had Ryuuji's body heat contentedly, disregarding the messy state of the hair that was caught in the scarf, like a kitten who had just been picked up and hugged. *Looks like she really was freezing.* On the other hand, the scarf-less Ryuuji could only hunch his shoulders in response to the cold wind. He clutched the front collar of his uniform to endure the freezing cold, straightening his back in an attempt to convince himself that he wasn't cold at all.

"Anyway, the weather is extremely cold today... I'm worried that Kitamura-kun is sleeping in some concrete drain... So pitiful..."

"Concrete drain... What are you taking about, he would probably have gone home right?"

The corpse that was Kitamura had disappeared after running out of the classroom like a maniac. Calls to his home went straight to an answering machine, calls to his cellphone were ignored, and he neither returned the calls nor replied to the messages. *Well, calls to Kitamura's home would normally go straight to the answering machine anyway, since both of his parents work, so... He probably won't be sleeping in some concrete drain...but...*

"Mmm...", mumbled Taiga, whose nose was also buried in the scarf, wrinkling her eyebrows in thought,

"Kitamura-kun has been too serious about his work, that's why all of the pent-up tension from the stresses of life could suddenly explode like that."

Taiga, who besides the three major wants of life (Food = I'm hungry! Rest = I want to sleep! Sex = I like Kitamura-kun!) rarely lapsed into deep thought like a normal human being, gave an extraordinarily serious assertion of Kitamura's condition. Ryuuji nodded in agreement,

"Now that you mention it, his abnormal actions could be a self-defense mechanism to release stress... Although it's caused a lot of trouble to everyone."

"Releasing stress is really important. I should release some stress too."

You should pass, you regularly release enough stress already... Ryuuji didn't have time to speak before Taiga started muttering "Release, release..." in a low voice while moving her fists with astonishing speed (a combination of jabs and hooks), striking a foreboding sense of fear into Ryuuji's heart. He clutched both their bentos close to his chest like a girl, backing away from Taiga. It would be good if everyone could live as strongly as Taiga...

"Ah, Minorin! That's great, I haven't been abandoned today!"

Taiga noticed Minori, who was waving at them from the usual crossroad, and quickly ran to her, latching onto her arm,

"Good morning! It's so cold today, Minorin, winter has descended onto this world!"

"Good morning!!! You're so heavy, Taiga! My arm is going to break! Is it that cold? You're even wearing a scarf, that's too weak. Don't you think so, Takasu-kun, good morningggggg!"

Actually, I'm the weak one... Ryuuji couldn't get himself to say that, so he could only put on a serious face to hide his embarrassment, raising a hand to greet the beaming Minori. On a cold and gloomy morning, Minori's smile was as brilliant as a sunflower in full bloom. Minori's nose slowly moved to Taiga and sniffed,

"Hmm? Taiga's scarf has the smell of a man. It's the same smell that lingers in my bathroom after my brother is done dressing... Ah, could this scarf be Takasu-kun's? He lent it to you?"

Too sharp. *Oh no, won't Minori find out about my naturally overflowing gentleness?* Ryuuji scratched his head in embarrassment and prepared to nod with a pathetic smile and say, "Oh~ I've been found out, it's so embarrassing" but...

"I was cold, so I forcibly took it from Ryuuji."

Taiga used a not-so-truthful explanation to cut Ryuuji off. Ryuuji had no time to make his opinion known before Minori had fully accepted Taiga's explanation, and continued,

"Hmm...!? How could you do this!? Takasu-kun will catch a cold like this! If you're so sensitive to the cold, then I'll let you borrow my track pants! Take it, I've washed it already!"

"No!!! Why am I the weak one while Ryuuji's the one who'll catch a cold!?"

"Despite Takasu-kun's appearance, he's actually a very delicate Gilbert... Right? My little bird..."

I don't understand who she was referring to by Gilbert... No, the main point is, what kind of appearance is 'that kind of appearance'? Similar thoughts surfaced in Ryuuji's mind, but he swallowed his questions, and shook his head while saying,

"I'm not a little bird, and I'm not cold, and my scarf was also not forcibly taken away..."

"Che! What are you acting cool about? I expended a considerable amount of energy before I took possession of it. It's because you were so proud of your scarf, so I thought I would 'kindly' help you use it for a while. Hmph! Thank me!"

Taiga arrogantly stuck her chin out and turned around, running off without giving a thought to her face, which was half-covered by the scarf, leaving Minori and Ryuuji behind.

"Hey, Hey! She actually ran off by herself! Taiga's no different from an oppressive landlord! Takasu-kun really won't be cold? Do you want to wrap this around your neck?"

Minori glanced at Taiga's back torpidly, taking her track pants out from her bag.

"Ah!? No need, I'm alright, really! There's no cause for worry!"

Ryuuji still had not reached the level where he dared to walk through the front gate of the school with the track pants of his crush wrapped around his neck. Not that he wasn't interested in Minori's track pants, on the contrary. It could be said that he was extremely interested, but he just couldn't bring himself to wrap her track pants around his neck in a public place. Because of his interest in her track pants, he couldn't do it.

"Really? Then it's alright...but the one I'm really worried about is Kitamura. Has he contacted you? I've been messaging and calling him non-stop since yesterday, but he didn't respond..."

"I haven't been able to contact him either. Don't know if he'll come to school..."

"Yeah... What should we do if he doesn't come to school today... There's no school on Saturday and Sunday, I'm worried that we won't be able to see him before next Monday."

The two of them walked forward side by side, their breaths piling on top of each other in the cold air. The interweaving mist in front of them seemed to balloon every time they worried about Kitamura. This moment wasn't as sweet as Ryuuji had envisioned it to be.

Taiga, who was walking in front of them, stopped as a traffic light turned red, and both Ryuuji and Minori took the chance to catch up with her without breaking into a run. Minori's reason for not breaking into a run was probably because she knew that she could catch up while the traffic light was still red. As for Ryuuji, it was because even though it wasn't a sweet moment, he still wanted to walk beside Minori for a while longer. Although his heart was laden with worry for Kitamura, just a little...

"Hmm..." Minori wrinkled her eyebrows, probably thinking about Kitamura's situation. She then took out a stick of lip balm from her pocket, Ryuuji quickly stopped her hand which was about to take off the cap of the lip balm.

"Ah! No, Minori, you shouldn't apply the lip balm while walking. Something bad might happen."

"What, what are you talking about! Do you intend to lecture me on my actions? You vicious daughter-in-law! How can something bad happen!? Ah, or are you trying to say that I'm too old for lip balm!"

"No one's playing the 'mother and daughter-in-law game' with you... I'm saying that the lip balm may accidentally get stuck in your nostril."

"My nostril? How can such a thing happen? Even I can tell you that such a thing can never happen."

"It will happen by accident sometimes. I'll keep this safe until we reach school."

"Huh!? But my lips will dry up! They'll crack!"

"Some things are more important than lips..."

"Che~ You really know how to argue! I guess I don't have a choice, take it, count it as my treat."

Losing to (not confirmed) Ryuuji's warmhearted honesty, Minori handed the lip balm to Ryuuji. Ryuuji, hoping from the bottom of his heart that Minori would not have a memory of an uncontrollably sniffling nose, placed the lip balm into his pocket after nodding repeatedly. Of course, he didn't think about secretly applying the lip balm in the toilet at school later, ne-ne-ne-ne-never!

"Anyway, it seems that every girl has a stick of lip balm. Do you apply it often?"

Ryuuji asked, not to cover up the deepest desire of his heart, but out of pure curiosity. He didn't think he knew any guy who walked around with a stick of lip balm in his pocket.

"Yes, I apply it often as I want to maintain the glossy texture and moisture on my lips. There is no reason for the womanly desire for moisturized and glossy lips. Taiga carries one around too."

"I know, it's Nivea's 'WATERING' right?"

"You're so clear about it! You know everything about Taiga don't you!

"Yup."

Why do I even know the brand of lip balm that Taiga uses? Because it spent a period of time in my nostril. But Ryuuji couldn't say this out loud, so he just looked contemplatively at a faraway place, remembering the feeling when the peppermint flavor permeated the whole of his nostril. "Ahaha, so it's like this." Even Minori didn't know that the slightly distant laughter had once been covered by the mental anguish caused by the peppermint-flavored lip balm.

"That's right, I'm very familiar...and I really regret not confiscating that stick of lip balm before the accident happened..."

"Oh, an accident... Wh-What do you mean by that!? Don't tell me..."

"Th-The meaning is..." Right in front of Minori's wavering gaze was Taiga, who had hidden her face in the scarf, staring intently at the traffic light.

She walked on the spot while waiting for the light to turn from red to green, looking as if she wanted to stamp out the coldness that was coming up from her legs while completely covering her nose in the cashmere scarf. She hunched her shoulders, clenched her hands that were in her pockets into fists, and closed her eyes.

Taiga's position gave the impression of a baby penguin that was braving a snowstorm. Ryuuji almost laughed, but managed to stop himself just in time.

"Are you really that cold?"

Ryuuji stepped up beside Taiga, directing his question towards her hair whorl. The long eyelashes stubbornly refused to move, sniffing loudly in the baby penguin position,

"...It's extremely cold, but it's a bit better with the scarf."

* * *

"Ah! You came at the right time! Come here, Takasu-kun! Come with me! Hurry up!"

"Huh..."

Just when he was preparing to step into the campus after changing into indoor shoes, someone grabbed Ryuuji's wrist - that person was the familiar class teacher, the single woman. Just what happened the previous night? Koigakubo Yuri (30), who just yesterday had put on the perfect image, now had no makeup on her face, her hair loosely tied in a rubber band, miserably dressed in a track suit, which, when combined with the wrinkles on the edges of her eyes, served to add a whole decade to her actual age.

"Wa-Wai-Wait...? What's wrong!? Actually, I'm more interested in why you suddenly look as though you've aged..."

"Don't talk about my age! Just follow me!"

The single woman totally ignored Minori and Taiga, who had walked into school together, pulling Ryuuji who was still stepping on the heels of his indoor shoes by the arm forwards. Her other arm was gripping another person...

"Hey! Kawashima!"

"Ah~ Good morning Takasu-kun~ Wait, now's not the time for this! Argh, it's so irritating! What's the problem? What did Ami-chan do to deserve this!? What are you doing!?"

"I don't know anything either!"

By the looks of it, it seemed as though Ami had been captured the moment she entered the school too, as she was still carrying her bag on her shoulder, being forcibly dragged away together with Ryuuji. Her beautiful face was twisted in annoyance, being unable to shake off the single woman's vise-like grip on her arm, but she had no choice but to let herself be dragged...rather, to be lugged around.

"It's not a big deal if Takasu-kun is captured, but why must the cute Ami-chan be captured too!?"

"What do you mean by 'It's not a big deal' if I'm captured...?"

Taiga and Minori were unable to grasp the situation, and so could only stand there with wide eyes and open mouths, staring at the retreating figures of the two prisoners.

Ignoring everyone around her, the single woman dragged the cute Ami-chan and the not so cute Ryuuji to their final destination...

For a few seconds, Ryuuji was unable to recognize the guy who had raised his head.

"...HUH!?"

His bag fell to the ground as realization kicked in.

"Huh!? Ha!? Ha..."

Ami opened her eyes to their fullest capacity,

"AHAHAHAHAHAHA! What's this about, what happened~!?"

She unexpectedly started to laugh extremely loudly. *Is it the right time to laugh?* Ryuuji turned to Ami, and glared at her. Noticing Ryuuji's gaze,

Ami stuck out her tongue, "What's~ wrong~?" It was too late to start acting cute. The already bad atmosphere in the room was made even more awkward by Ami's untimely outburst.

The interview room, which they had been forcibly brought into, was the room which the students called "the lecture room".

The single woman lightly shut the door behind Ryuuji and Ami. Besides the three of them, the notoriously strict disciplinary teacher was also seated in the room, and the person next to him with shoulder-length black hair was an unexpected presence...

"Big Brother...no, Kano...senpai..."

Ryuuji accidentally blurted out. Even her gaze had an unknown charm to it, and this person was the student council president, Kano Sumire. Although she appeared to be a delicate and steady beauty, she was extremely straightforward and blunt like a guy, thus earning the title of "Big Brother", the famous student council president who could go down in history as one of the school's most accomplished student council presidents. "Big Brother" obviously didn't hold the title for nothing, as she crossed her arms, and looked around her with a piercing gaze, despite being thrown into such a weird situation.

Ryuuji and Ami looked down at the guy who was kneeling on the floor.

Ryuuji shouldn't be able to recognize this person. Because his golden hair was obviously over-dyed with a cheap hair dye, causing it to lose its luster and shine, Ryuuji should not have this kind of friend...theoretically, but under the messy fringe sat an extremely familiar pair of silver-lined spectacles, behind which was an even more familiar face.

"Kita...Kitamura, you..."

He recognized that face.

"Wha... What's with that hair! Isn't this against the school rules...and...and..."

He didn't know if he should ask about that, but he still asked.

"..."

There was no response. The look that Kitamura gave Ryuuji was uncharacteristically fierce, as if it was saying "See for yourself, there is nothing much to say."

Kitamura Yuusaku had become a delinquent.

He stubbornly shook his bleached hair, ignoring the question from his best friend, a hardheaded resignation showing in his eyes. Upon closer inspection, it could be seen that his glasses were bent at an awkward angle, the top two buttons of his uniform shirt were coming off, and that there was sand and dirt on his shoulders, giving the impression that he had been pushed down onto the ground.

"Ah, Takasu and Kawashima, what do you think of this guy's hair?"

"What do I think? How am I supposed to answer that..."

Ryuuji didn't know how to answer, and looked to Ami, who was standing beside him. Ami was fixing her beautiful nails as if she didn't hear the question, as if the whole situation did not concern her at all. The disciplinary teacher continued speaking in a serious tone,

"This guy came to school with this kind of hairstyle and ignored the counseling teacher at the school gate. About such actions, what do the two of you think? Do you know the reason for such actions? He refuses to answer any questions we ask him, so we had to call for his best friend Takasu, his childhood friend Kawashima, and the Big Brother who has been taking care of him in the student council... Big sister Kano here... Sorry Kano, to call you here when you're busy..."

"It's alright, it's a pity I cannot be of much help. I don't understand the situation, and he has already quit the student council, so he is no longer associated with me in any way."

Kitamura quit the student council? Ryuuji almost wanted to speak, but felt that it wasn't the right time to open his mouth. But when he thought about it, the Kitamura who went mad yesterday did mention it.

The perfect student council president gazed at the golden-haired delinquent coldly, as if wishing to impale him with the look alone. Kitamura looked as though he wanted to avoid her eyes, and twisted his body while biting down on his lower lip, hiding his facial expression with his low and untidy fringe.

"So, Takasu? Do you have any inkling of what happened?"

"Umm...this... How should I say this... Yesterday, umm, a bit.... Yeah..."

He wanted to talk about how Kitamura had been acting abnormally for a while now as a result of "burnout sickness", and also about how Kitamura had exploded in class yesterday, but he didn't know whether it would constitute a betrayal to Kitamura. He wanted to have a bit more time to think, but was unable to get it.



The disconcerted Ryuuji could only look to the single woman for help. The single woman gave Ryuuji an exhausted look, meaning "I've already told them about what happened yesterday." It seemed as though the single woman had been looking for the corpse who had run out of school and wasn't contactable ever since after school yesterday, and also had come to school extra-early today to wait for the corpse to show up. She even canceled her important date with the professor, but did not get anything in return, instead resulting in her accelerated aging.

"What about you Kawashima? Do you have anything to say?"

"Hmm~ Even if you ask me... I don't understand..."

Kawashima didn't forget to put on her watery doll-like eyes and her cute demeanor. Just as everyone in the room was looking at her cute demeanor,

"...It's unbelievable that there are still people using such obvious methods to rebel. Ah, there really are~ but so what? Though it doesn't concern me, don't you think it's extremely absurd?"

The corners of her mouth curled up viciously, slowly expanding her attack on her childhood friend. Her black-hearted character almost completely exposed, the look that was full of contempt went through Kitamura's body like bullets, cruelly aiming for the exaggeratedly-colored hair. Ah, Ryuuji could only look to the ceiling. Yes, sometimes Ami was even worse than Taiga, a woman full of explosives.

She continued to make full use of her vicious personality, stepping forward,

"Yuusaku, don't you think you're expecting too much of other people? 'Look at me. Worry about me. Look at how frustrated I am. Someone take notice of me~!'. Isn't this what you want to say? Ah, even the bystanders are disgusted with you~. You're already in your second year of high school and you're still trying to rebel by bleaching your hair, but it's repulsive! This sort of thing has been outdated since the third year of middle school, and

it'll only be the middle-aged blue collar workers who'll dye their hair to cover their white hair. Anyway, seriously, what kind of hair is that? You did it yourself? I'm sorry, but honestly, IT. DOESN'T. SUIT. YOU!"

"AHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!" After speaking, Ami once again burst into wild laughter while pointing her finger at Kitamura. She laughed until she had tears in her eyes, with no sign of any gentleness, worry or hesitation. Ami's hurtful scolding even affected Ryuuji, who felt as though a part of him was being cut away, and wanted to rush in front of Kitamura to block the knives that were cutting into his best friend. But he couldn't do it. In response to the cutting words of his childhood friend, Kitamura merely lowered his head and bit his lower lip even more stubbornly.

"Sigh..." The exhausted single woman sighed tiredly. She rubbed her dry eyes which were ringed with a tinge of blackness due to the lack of makeup, and put her hands on the shoulders of Ryuuji and Ami,

"The two of you should go back to the classroom first. Sorry for the inconvenience, and thank you. I'll go after I talk to Kitamura-kun for a while more. Homeroom will be conducted by the assistant class teacher. If possible, please do not say anything to your classmates okay? I'll try my best to bring Kitamura-kun back to class as though 'nothing has happened'."

"Okay, we understand..."

Ryuuji nodded his head honestly, but his voice was cut off by a low and fierce voice.

"I think it would be more appropriate for Koigakubo-sensei to send him home."

The voice came from Kano Sumire. She straightened her thin frame and stood up, her eyes glinting intensely, looking straight at Kitamura, who was now seated on the ground. Her gaze did not contain a shred of human warmth, her posture flawless. In Ryuuji's eyes, she was like an impeccable android far beyond normal human capabilities.

"There is no need to waste time on such an idiot. Since he does not intend to open his mouth, then there is no reason to be concerned about him. The school rules state that 'Hair styles which do not reinforce the image of a student are strictly prohibited', and he has clearly broken the rule. In my opinion, he should be suspended from school until his hair style conforms to the school rule."

"...Kano-san should be going back to class too. I still have to talk to Kitamura-kun, thank you for coming."

The single woman shook her head slowly, putting her hand onto Kitamura's shoulder protectively to help him to stand up and into a chair, then standing up together with the disciplinary teacher, effectively surrounding Kitamura. This action alone clearly indicated the "not giving up" attitude of the teachers.

At this sight, even Sumire turned her gaze away from Kitamura.

It was clear that the meeting was over. Sumire stood up and bowed, with Ryuuji and Ami following her actions, moving out of the room to leave Kitamura by himself.

The other classes should have begun their homeroom already right? There was no one in the quiet corridor.

Ryuuji bowed to Sumire, and prepared to walk to his classroom...

"Sen~pai?"

Ami's sweet voice sounded in the overly-silent corridor. Ignoring Ryuuji, Sumire turned around, directly facing Ami. Even Ryuuji could feel the challenge that Sumire sent out towards Ami. Ami's cute face revealed a vicious smile, as if she was preparing to provoke Sumire. Ryuuji, who despite his fear of the situation still wanted to stop this confrontation, was pushed to one side.

"Kano-senpai, you seem to be very cold towards Yuusaku? Ah~ Yuusaku's so pitiful~ He admires senpai so much...but Kano-senpai, you

didn't seem to be so cold towards Yuusaku in the past... Could it be that something happened between Yuusaku and senpai recently? Might Yuusaku's rebelliousness be associated with senpai?"

"About that..."

Sumire wasn't provoked at all, but merely smiled politely out of the corners of her mouth and ignored Ami's provocative words, turning to walk down the corridor once again. Ryuuji couldn't help opening his mouth to her retreating back,

"I'm really sorry! To have said something so rude... Kawashima has a bad personality..."

"That's mean! What do you mean by that!?" Ryuuji covered Ami's noisy mouth, apologizing to Sumire. Sumire merely raised her eyebrow, indicating that she wasn't offended.

"It's nothing, I'm alright with it... Bad personality? What's so bad about that? At least her words towards Kitamura just now were right. Looks like Kitamura has a very good childhood friend. Alright, if you have any problems, come and find me anytime."

"Right. And...Senpai, if you have any clues..."

"You'll want me to inform you right? Actually I do have a clue."

Ryuuji, who was originally bowing to send Sumire off, quickly raised his head in shock, and Ami, who was being forced to bow by Ryuuji, also stopped her struggling. The flawless student council president looked calmly at Ryuuji and Ami and shrugged her shoulders lightly,

"I have a clue, but if it really is the reason that I think it is, I will be even more disappointed with Kitamura."

An expression that was neither happy nor angry appeared on her face, and she turned towards the third-year classrooms unhesitantly, like a man after saying a short "good bye".

To let Sumire be even more disappointed... Ryuuji gazed at Sumire's retreating figure while thinking over that phrase in his mind.

"What is this...? I'm extremely~ annoyed by that cold-blooded self-styled elitist! And also..."

Ami spoke while flicking her straight and long hair, her voice echoing in the silent campus. Ryuuji quickly turned and glared at Ami,

"I-Idiot! She definitely heard it!"

"It's already too late for that." Ami expressed her displeasure, and said,

"So what if she hears it? I'm speaking the truth. She's obviously the main reason, and yet she acts as though she knows nothing, only leaving behind an ambiguous 'Actually, there is something' while not giving the whole picture, just like Yuusaku! Talking in that manner to arouse the interest of other people, hoping that someone will understand. That's over-anticipation! Does she seriously think that the Earth orbits around her!?"

Ami's sharp eyes that were as beautiful as a transparent brown-tinged crystal ball hid none of her annoyance. The cutting words that came out of her mouth made people want to push her down and force her to put on her nice demeanor.

"You... Why are you so harsh...?"

Ryuuji expended almost all his energy in getting those words out of his mouth, feeling as though he wanted to hug his head and squat down on the floor. Kitamura's rebelliousness, the reaction of the student council president, Ami's words - Ryuuji's brain could no longer process the information.

"Because I'm angry~"

"What are you talking about!? Aren't you the one making everyone feel uncomfortable!? And what do you mean by those words!? You seem to be pushing all the blame onto Kano-senpai."

Although Ami had once again put on her nice demeanor, she had no intention of letting go of her argument.

"Huh~? Takasu-kun, don't you understand? It has to be her fault! Only the student council president could turn Yuusaku into something like that. And listen to what that woman said... Hmph, it's probably along the lines of his confession being rejected right? Ah~ That's so boring... God! Return Ami-chan's precious time to her~"

"Con...Confession!? How can it be! Why has it suddenly become like this!?"

Ami turned around and started walking. She didn't even turn her head, only sighing loudly, and lowering her shoulders, signaling her feelings of irritation to Ryuuji,

"Takasu-kun, you always miss the most important points, though I don't dislike this part of you. But it'll eventually become your Achilles heel."

"Wha...?"

What does she mean? Although Ryuuji thought that, since he couldn't win in an argument with Ami, he didn't reply. If there was a cannon nearby, he would use Taiga as the cannonball to attack Ami. As long as Taiga was willing to go in firing on all cylinders to help Ryuuji release his pent-up feelings, he would let the two ladies fight to their hearts' content. Ami's criticism was referring to the superficiality of females right?

Right, to explain everything through love, that's the hasty and superficial characteristic specific to females.

Kitamura does admire that Big Brother from the bottom of his heart, as he worked tirelessly for the student council since year 1, and always said that she was the most deserving of respect, the best student council president.

Although he was also the captain of the boy's softball team and the class representative, he never complained about the mountain of administrative work that he had to do for the student council. Ryuuji, who had been Kitamura's best friend since year 1, knew this better than anyone else. Ryuuji also understood that the motivation behind Kitamura's passion for the student council was his feelings towards the flawless Big Brother Kano Sumire. Ryuuji didn't need to get close to Sumire to understand her overwhelming charm. The flawless and exceedingly outstanding Kano Sumire was like superhuman, one who struck awe and fear into her peers. Since the two of them often worked together in the student council, it wasn't surprising that such feelings of admiration only intensified. But Ryuuji felt that the very essence of that admiration stemmed from Kitamura's respect for a senpai that was more outstanding than him, and not from romantic feelings for her. Although they were of opposite genders, it would not be a mistake to classify them as members of the same gender regarding the student council. How can it be possible for a guy to fall in love with a male colleague at work? Ryuuji felt that Ami's way of explaining everything through love was too biased, superficial and crude. Kitamura's actions cannot be the result of the superficial thing that is "love". Yes, it should be of a higher order. It can be seen as "admiration", a passion to serve a more outstanding senpai. It must be like this! Because that person is the flawless student council president, the reliable, perfect leader of the student population.

As he got to this point in his thoughts, Ryuuji suddenly noticed something that made his blood run cold.

The situation was so serious that Kitamura had to quit the student council which he had always held in high regard? It looked like the situation was much more serious than Ryuuji had initially thought.

"...Hey!? Isn't that Kitamura?"

Homeroom started under the watchful eyes of the assistant class teacher. Just as the roll call was coming to an end, there was a burst of excitement among the students of class 2-C.

The voice came from a student sitting beside the window, causing the whole class to rush to the windows, squashing themselves against the glass while ignoring the admonitions of the assistant class teacher. Taiga, who didn't become cannon fodder in the end, also rushed to the windows, climbing on top of the heads of her classmates to get a look outside the window.

"Enough! I'm going home!"

"You're not allowed to go home! Idiot!"

"Ca-Ca-Ca-Calm down, anyway just calm down first!"

The three figures who were repeating the above sentences were currently entangled at the stairwell. They were the single woman (30), the middle-aged disciplinary teacher, and...

"Blo-Blond hair! What's with that hair!"

"It can't be! Is it really Maruo!?"

"Impossible! Kitamura's has become a delinquent!"

"Be seated! Don't look outside! Alright now, be seated!"

The assistant class teacher forcibly dragged the students by the collar one by one away from the windows. But Taiga could only stare in a daze at the scene outside. The person who was making a beeline for the school gate... His collar being clutched by someone, the front buttons of his uniform jacket flying off, the buttons on his white shirt also missing, his upper body almost naked, the person who broke the school rules and was now struggling to break free of the teachers' grip... It could only be Kitamura.

Although his hair had been dyed a golden blond, it definitely was Kitamura Yuusaku.

"Alright, sit down quietly... Gah..."

Taiga, who was holding her breath, not noticing that her elbow had gone straight into the stomach of the assistant class teacher, had only one question in her mind. "Why?"

* * *

In the end, Kitamura was dragged back to school, and seemed to be locked in the interview room for now.

"Yuri-sensei's English lesson and morning's homeroom all became self-study sessions. I guess she's still interrogating Kitamura, right?"

Noto, who brought back this information, was biting on his fork, the eyes behind his black-rimmed spectacles revealing a deep-seated worry while pouring ketchup onto his fried chicken.

Theoretically, lunchtime should be a happy time, but Ryuuji, Noto, Taiga and the others who were seated at the same table while looking at the bentous in front of them, wore the same dark expression on their faces... Ryuuji's expression had already surpassed "dark", and was now in the "horrifying" region. "As if nothing has happened"... the single woman's well-meaning plan had failed, and now the whole class knew about Kitamura's newly-dyed hair. Even then, Ryuuji still wanted to keep the details away from his classmates as much as possible, so as to protect Kitamura to the fullest extent. Although he thought this way, how would it play out in reality...

"His parents will probably be called to school... Oh yes, what's Haruta doing at a time like this?"

"Sigh..." Noto, who was munching on a piece of fried chicken, wore a distasteful expression on his face.

"He should have gone to buy bread... Both of Kitamura's parents are working, so I don't think it'll be possible to get them to come to school during office hours...but his parents should already have found out about his hair. Taiga, mayonnaise."

"Mmm..."

"Becoming more like father and daughter...", Noto muttered softly. Ryuuji squeezed mayonnaise on both his and Taiga's fried chicken in front of him. After squeezing the mayonnaise, Ryuuji immediately cleared the empty packaging so as to prevent Taiga's elbow from squashing it or to prevent her getting some of the leftover mayonnaise onto her sleeve. He even cleared Noto's empty ketchup packaging. "Thank you." Noto waved his fork lightly.

"But it's really scary... Just what happened to Kitamura? It feels rather lonely for my messages to be ignored..."

"And he suddenly came to school with blond hair."

"Hmm, we should keep this a secret... Ah."

A piece of Noto's fried chicken suddenly swapped places with a piece of Ryuuji's homemade chicken. Although Ryuuji was preoccupied with Kitamura's situation, his wicked eyes that were flashing with blue-white flames immediately saw that his friend's bento only contained convenience store food, and so began to exchange side dishes with his chopsticks.

"Thanks, I was thinking that your bento looks really delicious."

"Take it, it's nothing much."

"Of course it's something, Ryuuji's cooking is extremely delicious...huh?"

"Gah..."

Taiga turned to Noto with a bewildered look, a groan emanating from her mouth.

"Ah, you want this too? Just take it if you don't mind the convenience store food that my lazy mother likes to use."

Noto noticed Taiga's expression and placed a piece of fried chicken onto the cover of her bentou. *Your bentous are identical again today...* Even Noto didn't feel like saying such things at this time. Taiga, on the other hand, placed one of Ryuuji's homemade rolls onto Noto's bentou in exchange. Although the two of them didn't say anything, their converging glances transcended all words. Exchanged... Yes, exchanged... A distinctly human-like exchange of culture took place between Taiga and Noto for the first time ever.

"Sigh..."

The two of them sighed and fell silent at the same time. Both Taiga and Noto were also worried about Kitamura.

It was only now that Ryuuji came to a realization - his abnormal actions are definitely not the effects of burnout sickness. If he was able to notice the abnormality sooner, then maybe the problem could have been solved before it expanded to the point where even the teachers had to be involved. But it was too late, Kitamura had already become a delinquent. If the positions of the two were reversed today, then Kitamura would surely have gotten involved the moment Ryuuji started to exhibit signs of abnormal behavior.

"I really...don't have the right to be his best friend..."

"Hey! Move aside, you peasant! Mr. Magistrate! I've brought the murderer!"

The shoulders which had slumped due to depression, were startled into raising up again.

"How could you say that!? That's mean! I'm not from Hokkaido!"

"You idiot, you better apologize to the people of Hokkaido until your throat bleeds!"

"Achoo!"

The constable, who had suddenly appeared, hooked her fingers into the nose of the the murderer and pulled upwards, transforming the lunchtime classroom into a court of justice. And the murderer, who was on the ground besides the feet of Ryuuji, Noto and Taiga was...

"Noto! Takasu! Save me!!! Minori is so callous! I didn't do anything at all! I didn't burn father's wooden hut!"

"Save your explanations for the other world."

"Wha-What do you mean? I don't understand you! Your jokes are always above me!"

The naturally air-headed Haruta shook his head vigorously. The constable who held Haruta down to prevent him from escaping was none other than Minori.

"Ha-Haruta, what are you doing!?"

"I say, Kushieda, you shouldn't be stepping on him with your shoes on...and who is Mr. Magistrate..."

"Everyone has a Mr. Governor in their hearts! Everyone has an important...purpose!"

The two guys couldn't help but to help their friend, who had tears in his eyes, up, while giving a place to the constable. After Minori sat down, she pulled on Haruta's chin roughly, demanding that he confess.

Haruta started to speaking while sniffing loudly,

"I really didn't do anything... just that Kitamura called me last night. I said, 'Hey, isn't this Kitamura? What happened to you today?', to which he replied, 'It's nothing, sorry for making you guys worry, I'm sorry', and suddenly asked, 'Didn't you dye your hair a really cool-looking blond during the holidays? How did you do it? Please teach me, handsome Haruta!' So I told him where to buy the dye, and that the time used to

apply the dye is roughly three times the stipulated time, and then to wrap aluminum foil around his head and dry with a hair-dryer to obtain that shiny hair color! That's all I told him!"

Ryuuji thought about it,

"Your impression of Kitamura probably underwent a paradigm shift right..."

"No, not like that." Ryuuji moved closer to Haruta with an extremely fierce expression,

"Didn't you ask him the reason for that kind of question!?"

"Ah! Your face is so scary!"

Although not on the same level as Ryuuji, but Noto also glared at Haruta beside Ryuuji,

"That's right! Takasu and I have been worried sick as we haven't been able to contact him the whole of yesterday! You were actually casually chatting with him?"

"How was I to know that Kitamura would dye his hair blonde! Ah... but I feel that it suits him... At least from afar right!? Haha!"

To use "casual" to describe this idiot was a gross understatement. His stupid expression detonated Minori's barely reined-in rage.

"Ah, I smell a thickheaded idiot here! This isn't the problem! The problem is why you didn't have any questions to ask Kitamura, who had left school in that manner!?"

"But even if he told me a lot of things, I would only remember the latter part of what he said! Because the earlier memories would have been squeezed out of my brain by the later memories!"

"You bastard! Useless brain! Useless brain! If you had taken the chance to ask him properly, Kitamura-kun, Kitamura-kun would have...! You bastard! I'll squeeze everything out of your head!"

"Ah~ I'll be extremely bothered by that~! I still have a life to live~!"

Minori grabbed the front of Haruta's shirt and shook it violently. At this time, someone pressed down on her hand. Surprisingly, it was Taiga.

"Minori, it's only a waste of time to lecture this idiot with reason."

Tears welled up in Haruta's eyes, who was currently surrounded on all sides by hostile forces,

"Tai-Taiga! I never thought that you would help me! I'm so happy! So touched! From today onwards I won't call you Aisaka anymore, I'll call you Taiga! Please call me Koji too!"

"I don't remember allowing a nameless pig like you to touch me with your trotters! Do I look like I'm very familiar with you!?"

"Ah!"

Haruta, who was preparing to move over to Taiga, received a merciless kick to the chin. Taiga's lowered gaze toward Haruta contained extreme annoyance and loathing, looking like a poisonous snake who was baring its teeth. The uncovered humiliation translated into the color of blood, making its presence known on Taiga's shaking lips. Yet, she didn't intend to lecture this idiot with reason, and it was obvious that jealousy had burnt Taiga's heart black. That's all there was to it.

"In any case... I'm extremely angry...! Why did he contact someone like you, and not me... I also sent messages to him asking if he was alright...!"

"Oh! Taiga sent messages to him too? Haha! That's great!!!"

Haruta, who was sitting down on the floor, exhibited his degree of stupidity to the largest extent, pointing towards Taiga with both hands, nonchalantly stepping into the sensitive topic that nobody dared to touch,

"It's like this~ You're jealous! Jealous! Looks like the rumors are true, you're romantically involved with Kitamura! That's so hot! So~hot! Taiga and Kitamura are hot~ Huhu! Ahahaha...ha!"

"Ryuuji, can I kill him? Can I?"

Taiga raised Haruta's head with one hand while laughing maniacally at the same time. Although she was laughing, her wide eyes were like black holes, and the lips that were laughing uncontrollably were coated with fresh blood as a result of her biting too hard.

"Ahahahahahahaha!", just like a broken doll, her neck swung from left to right, making cracking sounds. Ryuuji, paralyzed with fear, was unable to stop her. Taiga lifted Haruta off the ground into a kneeling position. Haruta started to choke due to the lack of oxygen, and his arm that was previously flailing in an attempt to escape now hung limp by his side. *He could really die!* Noto and Minori quickly tried to loosen Taiga's grip, but their voices could no longer reach Taiga's ears. The right hand which held the face gave out a *CRACK!*, as if something had broken.

"Ahahahahahahahahahaha!"

"Ah, he's really dead..."

As everyone stood stunned,

"Hey, Takasu-kun! Is it true that Maruo's quitting the student council!?"

Bam! Haruta's body fell onto the ground, but he immediately put on that familiar idiotic face of his. Taiga, Noto and Minori all turned to the source of the voice, who seemed to be extremely flustered. Ryuuji quickly stood up at the mention of the "student council".

"I just heard it from Ami! Maruo sees the student council as an extremely important part of his life, so does he really intend to quit? I've also heard that the reason for his rebelliousness is connected to the student council president, is this true too?"

That person was Maya, who was ruffling her cream-colored hair in agitation. Normally, she wouldn't even go near them if Kitamura wasn't there. Behind Maya, Nanako's eyebrows were also wrinkled with worry. Ami was behind Nanako. Everything had been leaked by her. The single

woman told us specifically not to mention it, but she told them everything... Ryuuji glared at her, to which she merely replied with a "So what?", immediately putting on an impeccable expression.

This woman is really...!

"What? Why? Have the two you heard anything? What does Ami know? Anyway, is Takasu hiding something from us?"

Upon hearing Noto's question, Ryuuji didn't have time to explain the situation before Ami cut him off.

"That's strange~ Noto-kun, didn't you hear anything from Takasu-kun? The two of us were called to the lecture room in the morning and saw Yuusaku there, and we were also asked a few strange questions~. It seems as though something happened within the student council. The student council president looked as though she knew everything~ right, Takasu-kun? Minori and the tiger were also there when Yuri-sensei forcibly dragged the two of us away right?"

Minori spoke,

"Yes, we saw it... Kano-senpai knows the reason behind Kitamura-kun's rebelliousness? The student council's the reason? Hey, this is the first time I'm hearing this. Takasu-kun, you told Taiga and me that the teachers only asked if you knew the reason for Kitamura's transformation right? What's going on, daughter-in-law? Did you think that us old people would not be of any help?"

"Gah...!"

My heart hurts, and my feet are unsteady, it would be better to just faint...but it's impossible to faint on command. Ryuuji turned around, and saw that Noto's eyes had marked him as a liar, and even Taiga's eyes emitted a murderous red light. "Ah...", looking at the situation, Ami revealed an irritatingly sweet angelic smile,

"Takasu-kun, why did you have to lie~? Minori and the others are really pitiful, they've all been misled by you... We're all friends, and everyone's just as worried as you. That's right, Takasu-kun is this kind of person~."

"Takasu-kun...! Is the magistrate in your heart weeping!?"

As he was scolded by his beloved Minori, Ryuuji felt hopeless, and glared back at Ami.

"You, you! Big traitor! Everyone listen to me, it's not like this! Sensei didn't want the whole situation to be blown up, so she asked the two of us to keep quiet for Kitamura's sake! Sensei said she would restore Kitamura to his normal self as though nothing happened! But you actually revealed everything so happily...!"

"That's ludicrous. It's just a small thing. What harm can come about if I talk about it? Anyway, the situation has already been blown up, and it's not like we're very clear about the details either~. Furthermore, Yuusaku quitting the student council is hardly any new information, you all remember that he was screaming about it as he ran out of the classroom yesterday right?"

"It's the first time I'm hearing this..."

"Yup, first time, first time."

"He said something like that?"

"No, I only remember Maruo shouting."

"I don't remember it either."

"My memories of yesterday are long gone."

Everyone crossed their hands in front of their chests, exchanging looks, going into an emergency meeting together. Ami snorted coldly, looking at her classmates, the curved corners of her mouth completely exposing her real personality. Someone lightly poked her on the shoulder,

"See, it's new information! Why did you reveal everything? The single woman asked us to keep silent because she didn't want to cause a commotion. What are you doing by spreading it around!?"

"Huh...? But I'm a natural air-head, and I'm not good at lying, so it just slipped out of my mouth."

"That's fake! You and your twisted personality! You evil person!"

Ryuuji finally said it, feeling a sense of accomplishment that made him shudder slightly. But in front of him, Ami's eyebrows merely showed that she was unconcerned,

"Don't be mistaken, Takasu-kun. I'm not an evil person, I'm a real honest person. Don't you see someone who's happy because she knows that Kitamura quit the student council? Isn't it all because I told the truth?"

"Look there!" An unmistakable laugh came from the direction in which Ami was pointing: Taiga's shaking shoulders. "Argh!" Ryuuji pulled Taiga behind him, blocking everyone's view so that her laughing face would not be seen by anyone else, whispering to her,

"Tai-Taiga... Your reaction isn't right!? Now's not the time to laugh!?"

Even though she was trying her hardest not to laugh, Taiga still squinted her eyes like a wild animal hiding in the shadows, laughing soundlessly with her abdominal muscles,

"Of course I'm worried about Kitamura-kun, and I also hope that he'll revert back to his normal self soon, but, but...! It's great to hear that Kitamura-kun's quitting the student council! Now he'll have cut off all connections with the self-styled monkey boss who's as irritating as a female mosquito..."

Such a self-centered kind of joy... How could someone be so selfish? "Look!" Taiga was really on the same level as Ami, who was laughing loudly. Just as evil of a person. Ryuuji's evil look was like the expression of a blood-soaked head which had just been separated from its body, and

was now planning to bite the jugular vein of the executioner. The evilness of the girls made him extremely afraid.



"In any case, the key to Maruo's rebelliousness lies with the student council right? Yes, it's reasonable, since he went crazy at the mention of the student council! The student council is like Maruo's 'life', looks like the situation is extremely serious! What can we do for Maruo?"

Maya balled her hands into fists, moving forward passionately. "Calm down calm down." Nanako tried to calm the red-faced, serious-looking Maya.

"That's right, Ami! Do you have any ideas?"

"Hmm... You're asking me?"

"Yes, of course we're asking you, since you're reliable and also Maruo's childhood friend. Please help us to get Maruo back to normal!"

Would her nice demeanor crack under this question...? Ryuuji crossed his arms in front of his chest, but didn't speak.

"How reliable can the stupid chihuahua be!"

"Ah!"

Taiga spoke for him. At the same time, she also stuck a piece of french fry from Noto's bentou straight into Ami's nostril, boldly and aggressively seeking the deeper reaches. Noto and Haruta stared at Ami's nostril, while Ryuuji, still nursing the psychological trauma of the peppermint-flavored lip balm, subconsciously rubbed his nose. *Looks like Taiga has learned another useless violent move.*

"Stupid chihuahua's 'stupid' is the stupid from stupid idiot! Stupid chihuahua does not have the necessary brains, disposition, and most importantly, gentleness! The only thing that that stupid chihuahua is good at doing is imitation, and she's not even good at that!"

"It...It's really painful, you idiot!"

"Gong..."

Ami hit Taiga on the head while rubbing her painful nose. "Ami, tissue!" "Give it to me!" Maya and Nanako provided tissues, and Minori took hold of Taiga's small head and shook it,

"Hey! Taiga! You can't do this!"

The other hand brushed the hair that had fallen onto her cheeks back behind her ears.

"What's so bad about an imperfect imitation? Third year~! Class B!"

"Minori, shut up! Now's not the time for that! Salt's coming out of Ami's nose!"

"Ma-Maya, you don't have to be so specific!"

Ami roughly grabbed the tissue from Maya's hands, glaring at Taiga with tears in her eyes.

"Tiger... I'm seriously angry today..."

"You're still so arrogant even with the salt from your nose glinting brightly, baldy."

"I'm not a baldy!"

"Bald, bald!"

"I'm not bald!"

The entire male population kept an uneasy silence at the unforeseeable future. Inherited...pressure...provocation to the scalp...aging...unavoidable destiny...no! The sensitive male heart was like a kaleidoscope, emitting a myriad of unsettling colors. But Taiga and Ami's sharp words gave no thought to the young hearts of the boys present, and instead were getting sharper by the minute.

"Yes yes, stupid chihuahua is a monstrosity with an extremely high rate of hair growth, not bald, not bald!"

"What!? I'm really angry now! I'm bald alright!? Yes, I'm bald! Bald!"

Ah... Now even the girls in the classroom were dyed with a tinge of depression.

"Darn! Whatever makes you happy! Ami-chan... Ami-chan's tired of all this! Work hard by yourself, you stupid mini tiger! Oh yes, I heard that you're Yuusaku's new squeeze right!? That's extremely stupid! I don't know, maybe your brains, gentleness, speed and whatever are enough~! Hmph, but your height is definitely not enough!"

"Ami, is it true!?"

Maya bravely pushed the fang-baring Taiga away, shouting nervously. Ami was past caring about her mask, totally exposing her real personality, twisting her beautiful face to shout,

"All of you don't understand the real Yuusaku! The good student who only cries like a baby in his comfort zone is only asking for attention! You'll only look stupid if you were to worry about that idiot! Since Maya and Nanako are so worried about him, then I'll tell you. To tell the truth, he isn't the person that you see on the surface!"

After speaking, the panting evil chihuahua put on an expression of self-satisfaction, coldly staring at the students who were worried about Kitamura, including Ryuuji.

"Has everyone forgotten? It's already the winter of our second year, time to seriously consider the college exams. Don't care about that golden-haired person, since he's probably trying to run away from the harsh realities of life. Everyone shouldn't have any extra time to worry about Yuusaku right? During the time you all are worrying about him, your other competitors in the same level are already going for revision classes, preparing for their futures, surpassing all of you. In any case, Yuusaku the good student might abandon all of you who are spending such precious time on him to study hard by himself to get to a good university. He

doesn't need to be student council president to be outstanding, since he's such a well-loved kid with a bright future."

"He should also know that someone will come and save him the moment he cries."

For some reason, the last sentence sounded like a soliloquy.

No one was able to rebut Ami, for everyone was rendered speechless at the argument that was painfully correct. *Slap!* Ami clapped her hands together, once again putting on her nice mask,

"That's it. Alright, everyone! Lunch break is almost over, start preparing for the next lesson! Time is limited, life will never be able to move forward if we're always doing happy things like cultural festivals. Alright, Noto-kun, finish your bentou quickly. Hey, Haruta-kun, wipe off your saliva. Takasu-kun, you'll be arrested for your face, quickly go for plastic surgery."

"...Ho-How does that concern you!?"

"HAHAHA!" Ami suddenly changed her attitude and walked away while laughing malevolently. Ryuuji could only stare at her retreating figure, and turned to look at Minori, who had poked him in the shoulder, unable to speak due the awkwardness caused by the exposed lie. But...

"Takasu-kun... No, the magistrate in Takasu-kun's heart, do you want to go visit Kitamura-kun's home after school?"

"Huh...?"

Minori gave a surprising suggestion, toying with a strand of hair in front of Ryuuji, who couldn't bear to lift his head,

"Mmm... I'm still worried about him. Even if it's just for a while, I want to see him, though I don't know what happened to him in the student council, but let's go and visit him together? It would be awkward for a weak lady

like me to visit a guy at his house. Looking at this kind of situation, I don't think Ami'll go with me. Taiga, are you going?"

Taiga had already squeezed in between Ryuuji and Minori even before her question, and was moving her head from side to side. Taiga's reason to Minori was, "I think that it'll be easier to talk to Kitamura-kun with fewer people," but she immediately turned around and revealed her true intentions to Ryuuji, "Though I really want to visit Kitamura's home, the most important thing right now is to make the current state of affairs continue like this... Truthfully, I really hope that Kitamura-kun will break away from the student council, so...you try your best to let the current state of affairs continue like this! Stupid dog KORO!"

To go out with Minori after school, Ryuuji couldn't believe his luck in securing such a wonderful event. But Ryuuji's worry about the difficulty of his mission overshadowed his feelings of happiness. He ignored Taiga's selfish wish, and did not think that Kitamura would listen to them just because they visited his home. He didn't understand Kitamura's line of thought, but also did not believe Ami's explanation that the whole fiasco stemmed from Kitamura's feelings for the student council president.

Although the reason remained unknown, Kitamura had really become a delinquent. It could be deduced that the reason had something to do with the student council, or even the student council president herself. By paying a visit to the Kitamura residence, Ryuuji hoped to obtain some kind of a clue, no matter how minute, regarding Kitamura's actions so that they could work on getting his best friend back to normal.

The afternoon lessons had started, but Ryuuji's facial expression was now extremely fierce, such that none of the teachers dared to look him straight in the eye. The boring classical literature lesson continued amid the teacher's inability to warn Ryuuji not to look out of the window and the absence of the class representative.

Chapter 3

Ryuuji placed his school bag on his legs while standing outside the school gate. He was waiting for Minori, who was intercepted by her juniors from the softball team just as they were about to leave school. "Bye bye!" "See you tomorrow!" After waving goodbye to each other in front of Ryuuji, the first year girls went their separate ways. It wouldn't have been nice to let them endure an unneeded fright. Therefore, Ryuuji deliberately lowered his head to avoid looking at them, taking care not to put on an expression that would imply that he was targeting them, and instead determinedly looked at his squeaky clean shoes.

Under the evening sky...

"I'm sorry to make you wait! Let's go!"

"Mm, okay."

Minori ran out of the school gate while flinging her schoolbag wildly. Ryuuji also started walking nonchalantly by her side. Although he already knew that he would be able to smell the peachy fragrance of her hair once he was near her, his heart was still weighed down by the rock that was "Kitamura's changed", but Ryuuji's heart still beat uncontrollably as a result of that familiar fragrance. Also, because of Ryuuji's well-behaved personality, he didn't think of weird things on his first walk alone with Minori after school, but instead concentrated on the road to Kitamura's home.

"We have to walk a bit, is that alright with you?"

"Yup, no problem. Does Takasu-kun know where Kitamura's home is?"

"It's over near the bridge. It's the residential area beside the suspended bridge on the highway."

"I see, it's near the city centre. That's rather close to my house."

Minori nodded in acknowledgment, her pace subconsciously speeding up. Ryuuji, who was almost left behind by her unreasonably fast walking pace, quickly jogged to catch up with Minori, tentatively patted her on the shoulder and spoke the words that he'd been wanting to say for a while,

"Wait! Erm... About the thing that happened during the lunch break... Sorry for not telling all of you about Kitamura."

"Oh!"

In the next second after the contact with her shoulder, she almost tripped due to the slightly differentiated height of the road surface, and made a surprised sound. It wasn't because she wanted to avoid Ryuuji's hand.

Although Minori almost tripped and fell, she maintained her balance by her own accord. If it was Taiga, she would surely have fallen onto the ground. It was testament to Minori's physical abilities that she was able to laugh awkwardly to mask her embarrassment of tripping before Ryuuji could lend his hand to steady her,

"Oh... That was close... It's alright. You didn't have a choice, it was a request from Yuri-sensei."

Minori nodded while making a V-sign at Ryuuji.

"I'm not offended at all, since it's obvious that Takasu-kun is also extremely worried about Kitamura-kun."

She generously forgave him, her pace also slowing down from the previously unreasonable pace, as the two of them were finally close enough to be able to maintain a conversation.

"I'm a very predictable person... I would always do whatever my teachers told me to do... I've been like this since birth, even handing in every single piece of homework on time, I..."

"Yes, Takasu-kun's is such an honest person."

"Luckily there was someone more honest than me, so everything can be out in the open now."

"Ahaha, you're talking about Ami, right?"

Their breaths turned into white mist in the cold air, disappearing into the darkening evening sky. The expression that appeared in both of their minds was "You're going to Yuusaku's home?" "Oh~ The two of you are really nice." "Yes~ and the two of you look so happy together, you're so intimate that I'm jealous." Although Ami had already gone home, her smile, which was more innocent than fairies playing in a magical forest, still didn't forget to spread its deadly poison to others.

Ryuuji got angry just at the thought of her. Ami's reaction at the recent state of events was extremely infuriating.

"What is wrong with her... She was still acting like a mature adult for some unknown reason a while ago. Now she has completely abandoned her facade, appearing in front of everyone as an evil person."

"What's so wrong with that? I like both the mature Ami and the evil Ami."

"So she's right up your alley..."

It could be seen just from the fact that Minori was Taiga's best friend that Minori had unusual tastes regarding girls. Thinking about this not-so-stupid thing got Ryuuji thinking about his own condition, that he was practically living together with Taiga while having a crush on Minori. In the eyes of an observer, Ryuuji's own tastes could be seen as weird too, right?

For the very first time, Ryuuji walked alone with Minori past the crossroad where Minori waited for him and Taiga every morning, continuing in the direction opposite from the Takasu residence. The withered autumn leaves danced in the wind on the sakura tree-lined road.

"Ami..."

Ryuuji was preparing to secretly peek at the side of Minori's face, but a sudden gust of cold wind made him shut his eyes involuntarily.

"She must be just as worried about Kitamura-kun as us, maybe even more worried than us."

"...With that kind of attitude!?"

"Yes, that's what I think. If you think about it, Ami has been working in the adult world for a few years now."

"Mm." After waiting for Ryuuji's nod of affirmation, Minori continued speaking, albeit with an uncharacteristic cold edge in her voice, but with a strong sense of belief.

"Ami knows more of the evils of society than the few of us, who are still children. As Kitamura-kun's childhood friend, she also knows things that we don't know about, but no one understands that she actually understands the most about the situation. Although she's faced with immaturity on all sides, she still patiently interacts with the childish people that we are. She also doesn't disregard our opinions, but treats us seriously. Although Ami's words are extremely scary, there are few friends who are willing to speak the 'truth' to us, right? Wouldn't normal people prefer to be gentle out of fear that they would be hated and ostracized if they were to speak the truth?"

"...Doesn't she just have a lousy personality? Is that a cause for such lavish praise?"

"Wrong, Ami is a good person, a very nice person, and this is something that I can confirm. Takasu-kun knows this too, right?"

"Sorry, but I don't know about that. She's merely displaying her true nature. Even now, are you still being tricked by her appearance?"

"Regardless of her appearance and her true nature, or whether she's lying or telling the truth, Ami is still Ami. I believe that she has her own reasons for saying such harsh words today. Or maybe I should say that..."

Minori suddenly lifted her head to look at Ryuuji.

Their gazes met, and Ryuuji saw that Minori was dead serious.

"...I wish that she would continue to be like this. It might be harsh to say this, but both Takasu-kun and I probably have a lot of things that we don't understand, right? Although we wish to be understood by others, we can't make it so. Right now, I think only Ami understands everything. How should I put it, I guess she's like the last hope for people like us...those who are childish, unable to understand others, and also unable to make other people understand them... Ah, what am I saying..."

Minori suddenly turned her gaze away, closing her mouth and turning to move forward with huge steps, while saying in a soft voice, "Kitamura-kun's house is this way, right?" Her ears were red, as if she was embarrassed by her overly-serious speech. *That's the part I like about her.* Ryuuji's heart was suddenly filled to the brim with boiling energy.

Her blushing face is extremely cute... Not this, but I like the way she's serious without being embarrassed about it. Having witnessed the moment in which she was only focused on one thing alone, Ryuuji's crush on her seemed to intensify even more.

Minori is more gentle, honest and warm than anyone else. She shines with righteous energy, shining on me with a sun-like brilliance and warmth, even into the dark recesses of my soul.

"Kushieda... How should I say this...is very gentle."

Although they were only a few simple words of praise, it was the culmination of the honest feelings of Ryuuji's heart.

"Gentle!?"

The sudden voice sounded like a lamentation, as the shocked Minori stopped in her tracks, turning abruptly to face Ryuuji. The pregnant lady who was on her way home after finishing her shopping looked at the two people facing off in the middle of the street in confusion.

"I'm not, no! I'm extremely arrogant and..."

It was impossible to deduce whether Minori was angry or smiling from her facial expression. She forced out an extremely small voice,

"...and dishonest."

Not giving Ryuuji a chance to ask about the real meaning of her words, Minori lowered her head and crouched down onto the ground.

"Ku-Kushieda...?"

"..."

She stayed in that position unmoving, as if she was frozen. Ryuuji's hesitant hand hovered in the air, unsure as to whether he should pat her on the back, the mandatory comforting words nowhere to be found.

"Kushieda... Hey, hey... I'm calling you..."

Another few seconds passed like this.

"...Oh! I'm sorry! I'll pass for this turn. It's alright, Jyounouchi-kun!"

Minori finally lifted her head, her face still clouded with a complicated expression, but she still forced a smile,

"Ah...lately, how do I say it... Yes, sorry, I'm alright, I'm really okay! Sorry!"

"What do you mean?"

"Huh?"

Although Ryuuji was hesitant as to whether he should respond, he decided to speak in the end,

"Giving such a complicated reason, and acting strangely all of a sudden... What are you apologizing for? And who's Jyounouchi?"

"Ah, I'm not apologizing... Erm...right."

"Although I can't be something as heroic as 'the last hope', I want to know more about you. You don't have to be Kawashima to understand you, right? I should be able to understand you too, right? Can't I? Although I'm immature and childish, just as you said, still... I still want to know everything about you."

Ryuuji was closing in slowly but surely.

Bit by bit, secretly getting nearer.

Ryuuji spoke honestly from his heart, covertly shortening the distance, trying to get closer to Minori. Hoping that she would answer, not wanting to be discovered, yet at the same time hoping to be discovered by her. During the few seconds in which he waited for her response, Ryuuji bit his lower lip tightly, putting his hands into his pockets, not wanting anybody to discover his frozen fingers.

"...It would probably be scary."

Then, Minori opened her mouth, rubbing her eyes in an attempt to mask her facial expression, the corners of her mouth curving into a smile,

"Takasu-kun, you must think that I'm perfect. But once you see the kind of person I really am, you would surely..."

"Time is limited!"

Ryuuji suddenly shouted loudly, shocking Minori into raising her lowered face.

"Didn't Kawashima say this before? She's right. Everything has a time limit, whether it be changing classes, graduation or the length of one's life. Do you want to let 'the childish Takasu-kun be ignorant' until our time comes to an end, and then let go? I don't intend to be childish and immature forever, and don't be afraid, I don't treat you like a saint who doesn't even need to go to the toilet."

Don't be afraid, because no matter what happens, I still like you. Ryuuji only said this sentence in his mind. *No matter what kind of appearance you put on, no matter if you're not the person I imagined you to be, I'll love you forever.* Ryuuji was unable to say such an exaggerated statement out loud. He should have said all that he needed and wanted to say... No, wait, wouldn't his true feelings be exposed like this? After saying all that he had said, Ryuuji was suddenly afraid. *It's too late to regret it!* Although it was a bit rushed, since he had already said it, he couldn't do anything about it... Ryuuji only started contemplating the results of his actions after he had spoken.

"Sparkle Sparkle Sparkle Sparkle Sparkle..."

"What...?"

In front of Minori's weird but dazzling actions, everything, whether it be the feelings of regret or the delicate nature of a man's heart, vanished into smoke.

Her hands opened up like the statue of the Buddha, her expression conveying a sense of peace. Her eyes half-open, her gaze seemingly looking upon the people of the world with comfort and pity. Minori had attained enlightenment in the middle of the road, chanting "Sparkle Sparkle", literally describing the brilliance that was emanating from her figure, and spread her legs to support her body weight on her toes,

"Let me tell you the truth. Takasu-kun's words almost sent me to heaven... Sparkle Sparkle Sparkle... I'm really happy. Right now, I feel that it would be enough as long as you can understand the feeling of my happiness. And as long as you continue to wait like this, the day of understanding will come... Sparkle Sparkle Sparkle..."

Ryuuji, who was almost sucked into the brilliance of Minori's world, forcefully kept his feet on the ground to keep his balance. That is to say, even though Minori was ultimately unable to reveal her inner thoughts and feelings to Ryuuji, in the future, she would be willing to open her heart to Ryuuji. Minori's unorthodox movements conveyed such a message. *Would*

I be overreacting if I explained it like this? But now's not the time to think about that! If I've misunderstood her message, it's Minori's fault for being so ambiguous.

That's a good explanation. Ryuuji laughed in spite of himself,

"It's alright, let's just leave it at that for today. I've already said all that I wanted to say. How do I say it... One day, I think I would want to know more about you...but I feel that for now, this is enough."

Ryuuji said everything in one breath. Opposite of him, Minori's face seemed to have melted into something not unlike a baby's face that was about to descend into uncontrollable sobs, but...

"...!"

In the ensuing silence, Minori's originally almost crying face changed into an extremely happy face in an instant. It could be seen from the blossoming smile that she gave Ryuuji that she was extremely happy, while her gentle, slightly trembling lips seemed like they were about to say something. But nothing came out of those lips, as though no words would ever come out of them as they were covered by a hand.

The words that were supposed to have come out of her mouth weren't conveyed to Ryuuji in the end, but neither of them felt that it was a pity. *Let's just stop here for today.* Ryuuji smiled.

"Hehe." Minori smiled and squinted her eyes, but in that moment, her eyes were trembling as though they saw something flying towards them from above Ryuuji's head.

The two of them reached the residential area with a bit of impatience at the perceived distance between each other. The Kitamura residence was on the gray street that was devoid of any green presence, lined up between a traditional style residence and a newly built, diminutive home.

Pressing down on the doorbell that was situated below that nameplate that said "Kitamura", there was no response. Kitamura's shiny motorbike was parked in front of the door, the window on the second floor was open, and the electric bicycle that Kitamura's mother had borrowed from her company was also parked to the side, but there was no response no matter how many times the doorbell sounded.

"No one's home?"

Minori muttered, attempting to contact Kitamura by phone - unsurprisingly, no one picked up. Minori cut the connection before the voice announcing the voicemail recording could finish speaking. Ryuuji's chest suddenly felt much colder. How could he forget his friends in his moment of madness!? A gust of cold wind blew like a cold hand on his chest, coming in from the gap in his school uniform. Taiga had borrowed his scarf again today.

* * *

"I'm home... Remember to lock the door as strange things have been happening lately. The pervert won't stop just because you're a woman whose kid is already in high school. Ah...it's so heavy. The cabbage was very cheap today."

Ryuuji walked into the darkened doorway. Taiga wasn't there during the time before dinner, so it was Yasuko and Ryuuji's private mother and son time. In the quiet apartment, the only sounds came from the television set, and Ryuuji would become even more talkative than usual if he relaxed just a bit. Still in his school uniform, he walked straight to the kitchen, putting down the environmentally-friendly bag that was stuffed with cabbage as he spoke (Homemade product. Sewn from a bag of cloth that was bought for 50 yen at a flea market, and is extremely durable and able to hold a sizable amount of things. It had once attracted the attention of the girls from the handicrafts club when Ryuuji brought it to school, resulting in

Ryuuji having to teach fifteen girls from the handicrafts club how to sew the bags after school. But anyway, the design is really nice!), skillfully placing the fresh food into the refrigerator, and picked up two pieces of cabbage, once again experiencing a heavy weight on his hands.

"This is real cabbage from Gunma, but it was selling for this price! The supermarket at the city centre is really good. You're asking me why I went to such a faraway place? Something big happened today. Kitamura, that Kitamura actually became a delinquent. You're shocked too, right? He suddenly appeared with blond hair. If you asked me whether it suits him... It doesn't suit him at all! It looks extremely weird! But that is definitely a sign of some kind. Anyway we're all very worried about him, so we paid a visit to his home, to ask about his situation, but he wasn't at home. That fellow is really worrying, all he does is to get himself in trouble... So in the end I went to buy cabbage and other things... Hey, didn't I say that you should at least rinse the used glasses with water? Because you only drink sweet things and don't bother to rinse the glass after drinking from it, it leads to flies who wouldn't be frozen no matter how cold the winter dying because they get stuck onto the glass. The glass isn't a fly-trap. Speaking of which, where do these small flies come from? Our home is extremely clean, so there shouldn't be any place for the breeding of such flies... It can't be from the landlord's house can it? The landlord's family only has old people, and the old lady has a very serious attitude, and it's not like they've done anything weird. But these flies..."

"The flies could have come from outside or from the pipes... You should know that even without me telling you right..."

"...!"

The sponge that was in his hand to wash the glass was dropped into the sink, the detergent disappearing into the water in the form of small bubbles, wasted.

The television set in the living room was turned on, and the person sitting in front of the low table should have been Yasuko. Because only two

people lived in this apartment, in the worst case scenario (?), it would have been Taiga. *But why are you here?* Shocked beyond words, unable to speak, heart beating furiously, hair standing on end, with only a corner of his brain still thinking rationally, a similar sound would be heard when encountering a burglar, right? Ryuuji was unable to speak as the person that he had wanted to see a while ago had conveniently appeared in his home.

"I've run away from home to your home... Sorry for the intrusion."

Ryuuji stiffly raised a hand that was covered with soap to him. That was the response that took all of his strength to undertake.

The blond-haired guy that was sitting in front of the low table, still wearing the dirty uniform from that morning, raised a hand in acknowledgment, looking at Ryuuji, who was standing in the kitchen. *What was that greeting for? Where have you run off to!? Why didn't you contact me!? Everyone's extremely worried about you!! Just what happened!?* There were too many questions that Ryuuji wanted to ask, with the end result being that all of them got stuck in his throat.

"I'm home~ Ah, Ryu-chan's shoes? Which means~ Ah~ Ryu-chan's back~! I say, listen to me, listen to me~ There's big news~! Kitamura has run away to our home~! Ah, look look, he's here~! So Ya-chan went to the convenience store to help him buy a pair of underwear, and my last pair of stockings was also torn, so I bought a new one~! Huh? What's wrong? You don't look excited at all~!"

With overly-thin eyebrows, a childish-looking face that was devoid of makeup, the UNQLO home pants that doubled as pajamas, legs that weren't clad in stockings, and her upper body clad in Ryuuji's middle school gym clothes - Yasuko, who appeared in such a fashion, gave a happy smile, casually passing a plastic bag containing a pair of underwear to Kitamura. Kitamura accepted the underwear and said, "Thank you! Oh, that's a really good pair!" *Now's not the time for this!* Ryuuji had a lot of things to say, and also... What was this about running away from home?

Ran away from home... Ran away from home!

He ran away from the Kitamura residence to our home!

At dinnertime!

But I only prepared three pieces of pork chops!

What to do!?

As the son's inner thoughts lapsed into a bout of chaos and confusion, his mother, who was in an extremely good mood, lightly touched his shoulder,

"Ryu-chan, Ya-chan and Shizuyo (the second most popular hostess at Bishamonten Kuni) are going to eat barbecue before going to work tonight~. So you don't have to prepare dinner for me tonight~."

"You're going out to eat. Oh, then the problem of the fried pork chops is solved... In any case, don't you usually go after work, at dawn? Something called 'after'."

"No~ Ya-chan will be drunk after work and unable to converse in Japanese~ Because Shizuyo had a boyfriend who she was thinking of marrying 'cause she thought he was a thirty year-old company president, but it turned out that he was actually a seventeen year-old blue-collar worker~. It's hard to believe right~? She even said something like 'This is considered a crime, right~?' Anyway, Ya-chan wants to listen to her story before she's drunk~"

"...So everything will be solved if you listen to her story?"

"I don't know. But roasted cow stomachs can make one appear younger."

You just want to eat roast meat, right? Yasuko went back to her own room to change. Ryuuji gestured to Kitamura, who was kneeling on the tatami mats in a well-behaved fashion, to sit on a cushion, and was contemplating whether to get him a cup of tea when Yasuko stuck out a pearly arm, indicating for her son to come over. Ryuuji went over and was

immediately dragged into the room by Yasuko, who closed the door. She whispered,

"...Don't tell Kitamura, but I've already contacted the Kitamura residence~. Anyway there's no school tomorrow, and Ya-chan doesn't need to go to work, so just let him stay here in the meantime."

"So can this...still be counted as running away from home...?"

"Don't think so, it'll only be counted as sleeping over for a night~. Actually there's one thing..."

Yasuko took out a piece of paper from the messy box that contained numerous make-up bottles and other objects which contained names written in beautiful handwriting and a stamp - that was the secret contract.

If the sons of the Kitamura or Takasu families were to run away from home, the other party listed in the contract will be contacted immediately, and exchange information on the whereabouts of the son. The undersigned, Kitamura Keiko and Takasu Yasuko.

"Huh? When did this happen?"

"Didn't Ya-chan buy insurance from Kitamura's mother's company~? So I made a contract with Kitamura's mother at that time~ So, Ryu-chan, if you ever want to run away from home, Ya-chan will know immediately if you run to Kitamura's home, be careful~."

"This can be hardly seen as a trap now that you've told me about it, right?"

"Huh~? What are you talking about? Ah~! That's right! Oh no, forget about it, forget about it~!"

The red-faced Yasuko flailed her limbs wildly in an attempt to get Ryuuji to forget what had just happened, while Ryuuji merely shut the door on his gym clothes-wearing mother, unconsciously checking the spotless apartment floor, wondering if a nut or bolt from Yasuko's brain had dropped onto the floor somewhere in the apartment.

Perhaps he had noticed Ryuuji's sharp gaze, or maybe he misunderstood the mother-son secret conference, Kitamura shrugged his shoulders apologetically, scratching his blond-colored head,

"Takasu, erm... Sorry for not informing you first, it's too sudden isn't it..."

"It's alright." Ryuuji shook his head in response,

"I am extremely shocked, but its better for you to come to my home, or I would be worried about what happened to you."

"Yasuko asked me to come, so I just listened to her..."

"Ah, alright, then just enjoy your time away from home. I'll be with you, so let's just look for a place to relax tomorrow. You probably have a lot of things you want to say, right?"

"..."

The blond-haired boy lapsed into a momentary silence...

"I'm hungry!!! What kind of meat are we having for dinner today!?"

BAM!!! The door of the old apartment flung open with a loud noise, the violent and fierce action threatening to bring down the house. *That fellow* had come today as well. The stomach alarm that sounded every day at the same time, and with the spare key that was taken without permission. Ryuuji had long gotten used to such insolent appearances, but Kitamura widened his eyes in shock to such a blatant intrusion. *That's not good...* Hearing the heavy footsteps that were getting nearer and nearer, Ryuuji unconsciously held his breath. He wasn't worried about Kitamura, but upon seeing such a scene, *that fellow* would probably die from embarrassment, right...? Looks like her funeral will be our responsibility.

And then...

"I said, what kind of meat!? What kind of fish!? Answer me! Just what are we having for dinner..."

"Ah, Aisaka!? What a coincidence! What's wrong? Have you run away from home too?"

Standing with her legs apart, wearing a red one piece western dress and woolen sweater, Taiga's face rapidly changed colour from white to green to red and to green again, finally resting on a dark red reminiscent of an over-ripened tomato.

"Oh...!"

Taiga's world was destroyed in an instant "What's, why, mm, ah...!" She turned and fell to the ground while muttering a string of incoherent sounds.

"Aisaka!? Hey, Takasu, something's wrong with Aisaka!"

It was obvious that something was wrong with Taiga even without Kitamura's proclamation. Ryuuji quickly moved forward to help her up,

"Tai, Taiga... Wake up! Come back to life! Kitamura has run away from home! He's sleeping at my house tonight!"

Ryuuji jabbed her in the cheek to bring her back to life. Opening the eyes that were almost hidden beneath trembling eyelashes, Taiga swiftly crawled in a different direction, using the wall as a support to get up, still shaking, and then walked stiffly to the doorway to shut the door with a loud bang. After counting to five, "Ding-dong~", she pressed down on the rarely-used doorbell of the Takasu residence. Ryuuji swallowed uncomfortably, and walked towards the hallway. *How can you hope to gloss over this? It's too much of a stretch...* Although he knew that nothing could be done at this point, he still opened the door...

"Th-Th-Th-Th-Th-Th-Th-Th-Th-Th-Th-Th-"

Taiga wore an extremely suspicious-looking smile on her face as she stammered,

"...Thank you for inviting me over for dinner today!"

"Please... Please come in."

Ryuuji led her into the apartment, and upon seeing Kitamura in the living room, "O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-Oh!" Taiga cheerily lifted her trembling right hand,

"I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-It's such a coincidence, Ki-Ki-Ki-Ki-Ki-Ki-Ki-Kitamura-kun."

"Yo, Aisaka! We meet again!"

How could everything be overlooked in this kind of situation!? But even then, Kitamura smiled gently at the extremely suspicious-looking Taiga. This blond-haired guy! This I-ran-away-from-home guy! This I-need-other-people-to-buy-my-underwear-for-me guy!

Yasuko went to eat barbecue and to work, leaving three kids in the Takasu residence. The sound of the cabbage being sliced at a high tempo of 16 beats per measure filled the apartment, while in the living room...

"You had mentioned living in the neighboring apartment complex, but I didn't know you actually lived by yourself."

"I, I didn't mention it? Ya-chan said I could come over everyday for dinner, so I took her up on her offer..."

"I see, it must be really nice to live next to Takasu."

"Mm, ah... yes."

"Oh, Inko-chan seems to be close to you as well, he's even licking your finger. Whoa...those tongue techniques are adventurous aren't they..."

Ryuuji secretly turned to look at the two people who were stammering behind his back. No, Taiga was the only one stammering, while Kitamura was his normal self, happily watching Taiga feeding Inko-chan cabbage. The actions of the two were both rather relaxed - both of them were on the tatami mats, hugging a cushion while holding their heads in their hands, one on each side of the bird cage.

"But tatami mats are still the best. My grandfather was tricked by the renovator many years ago to change the floor of the traditional house into cheap-looking floor boards, so I lost the space to roll around and have fun."

"My, my house is also renovated in a western style... Tatami mats are still the best..."

"Traditional homes still make people feel more at peace. Although it seems lazy, I wish I could roll about at home."

"We sure have a lot in common... Hehe."

Although Kitamura and Taiga's residences are both referred to as "Western-style houses", I guess there are substantial differences between the two, right? But since they look like they're enjoying themselves and nodding to agree with each other, such technicalities can be overlooked. The secretly laughing Ryuuji continued to cut the cabbage. The kitchen knife sent out a rhythmic sound from the high speed with which it was wielded. He deliberately didn't speak to the two of them, while Taiga was as well-behaved as a kitten that was in an unfamiliar surrounding, and with Kitamura looking relaxed. From an observer's point of view, the two of them seemed to have had a good atmosphere going.

The two of them might even unexpectedly become romantically involved. Ryuuji stuck the knife edge into the heart of the cabbage, his fierce eyes flaring with blue flames. He wasn't swearing to the death god to force the two of them to the deepest recesses of hell, to destroy their relationship no matter how many reincarnations they went through. He felt that Kitamura's abnormal situation had actually brought about a surprisingly favorable situation. Although he was worried about Kitamura, Kitamura looked rather normal himself. Perhaps he had met with some unhappy things in the student council, but he may well recover after running away from home for a few days to experience the feeling of being rebellious.

"Inko-chan is drooling while eating the cabbage... Pets are so nice, so cute."

"Cu, Cute... Mm, cute... Only a little..."

"Haha~haha~!" Ryuuji heard laughter coming from behind him. *It would be great if more good things were to happen between Kitamura and Taiga, and Minori and myself.* Putting the sliced-off cabbage heads into a freshness-maintenance bag, Ryuuji unconsciously started whistling. *It's such a waste~. It's such a waste~. This must be put into the refrigerator carefully, so it can be sliced into strips and cooked along with bacon tomorrow morning.*

"...Hehe~"

"Oh! What's wrong? Stay there to keep Kitamura company!"

Taiga was acting like a shy child who had run away from relatives, as she followed closely behind Ryuuji's back. It was a rare chance to be able to interact with Kitamura, but she rolled up her sleeves good-naturedly,

"I want to help! Yes, I'm good at washing dishes, let me wash dishes! Which ones need washing!?"

"Good, at...?"

"Yes! I'm very good at it!"

Looks like she intended to appear to be virtuous in front of Kitamura. But Takasu wasn't the type of man who would leave the tableware used for the sauce mixing unwashed. The tableware in question had already been washed, rinsed and kept in its correct place. The only ones which had not been kept were the ones which would be soon used.

Good at washing dishes... Although extremely dubious, Ryuuji accurately read Taiga's inner thoughts, so he whispered,

"You want to show him your good points, right?"

"...That's right!"

The two of them nodded to each other, secretly turning around to peek at Kitamura. He was lying on the tatami mats, looking at Inko-chan who was currently covered in cabbage strips and convulsing. So Ryuuji spoke in a loud voice,

"Alright, let's have Taiga help to make that delicious fried egg for us today!"

"Oh~ so Aisaka's best dish is fried eggs. The skill of the chef is most prominently displayed in the simplest of dishes. I'm sorry for assuming that Aisaka had absolutely no contact with household chores! I'm looking forward to it!"

In front of the smiling Kitamura, Taiga was like a newly married wife, replying bashfully "Hehe, please wait a while!" *Oh-oh... That's a nice atmosphere...* Ryuuji revealed a wraith-like smile, passing Taiga three eggs from the refrigerator. Taiga accepted the eggs demurely, whispering in a voice that only Ryuuji could hear,

"Now what do I do?"

"...Guh?"

"I said, what do I do now? What do I do to these things to change them into fried eggs?"

It can't be! Needle-thin cabbage slices that were stuck on the kitchen knife detached themselves and floated down onto the floor. Ryuuji had initially assumed that Taiga would at least be able to fry an egg, but it seems as though he had underestimated the extent of her uselessness.

"It's my fault!"

"To the Kitamura-kun who is trying to apologize, please go back. Anyway, why are you apologizing? Quick, teach me what to do with these eggs. Ah, and don't let Kitamura-kun find out that you're teaching me."

Ryuuji swallowed hard. Now he'd have to secretly teach the useless Taiga how to fry an egg while frying the pork chops at the same time. Ryuuji felt that this was an impossible task. But since it had already come to this, there was no turning back.

"Let's see... Take out the frying pan. You know which one is the frying pan right? The flat one..."

"Of course I would know such things."

Ryuuji pushed the cabbage into a basket and put it aside, placing the three pieces of pork chops on the cutting board, severing the tendon between the fat and the lean meat with the kitchen knife, while whispering out of the corner of his mouth,

"Crack the egg open, and put it into the bowl there. Do, Do you know how to crack an egg...?"

"Success rate of 50%... Do I crack them together?"

"It'll be good to crack them together under such conditions."

The trimmed lean meat was placed in a shallow plate, and mixed with salt, pepper and flour.

"Ah... The first try failed..."

Ryuuji swiftly took the bowl containing the failed attempt and took out another egg from the refrigerator,

"I'll use this for the panko bread crumb coating. This is the last one, there won't be any eggs left if you fail this time."

"O-O-Okay...!"

Everything was placed in the hands of God. Ryuuji broke up the failed egg attempt and sprinkled it with bits of panko. A side glance at Taiga confirmed that she had successfully completed her mission, with the egg yolks now floating in the bowl.

"Hah... Hah..."

Even at this stage, Taiga was covered in sweat. Ryuuji dipped the pork chops in the egg, and placed it in the shallow plate containing the panko,

"Light the fire, and pour some oil into the frying pan. There's oil there. You must let the oil cover the whole of the frying pan."

"Hah... Hah..."

"Don't be so excited, calm down. The fire's too strong! Turn it down, turn it down! Ah, my carefully taken care of frying pan!"

"How, How do I turn it down!? Ah, is it this one!?"

Taiga forcefully turned the switch to the "strong" side. Of course, the fire on the stove became even stronger.

"Wrong direction, you idiot! The other direction! Turn it in the other direction!"

"Ah, ah, I haven't poured the oil."

"Don't worry about the oil! Turn the switch in the other direction! Now's not the time to worry about the oil!"

"Ugu... Ah, I poured the oil!"

"Never mind! Don't worry about it! Just get the fire...! Wrong! That's the switch for the other stove!"

"H-H-H-Huh!?"

"Yes! That's the one! Spread the oil around! Turn! Ah, don't stick the wet chopsticks in!"

"Ah, h-h-h-h-hot! What's going on!"

Taiga used the wet chopsticks previously used to handle the cabbage to spread the oil in the frying pan, creating explosive drops of hot water

coming from the pan. Taiga jumped back in fear. "You idiot! You're not allowed to leave the fire!" Ryuuji's voice was like a teacher from hell,

"Rotate the pan, let the oil spread evenly across the surface! Stop!"

"Ah! It's hot! Hot hot hot! It's still exploding!"

"Isn't that all your fault? Quick, put the egg in! Lightly, lightly!"

"Ah! It exploded again! I'll be burnt to death~!"

"You won't die! Now turn the fire down, hold the cover with one hand... The cover! Now prepare a bit of water! Pour some into the glass and hold it with your other hand!"

"Co, Cover!? Which cover are you talking about!? Water!? Huh!? Let me think, oh, fire, fire!? Fire is... Huh!? Water, Water!? Fire, what to do with the fire!?"

"There can't be any other cover besides the cover for the frying pan at a time like this, right!? Hey! What did you do to the fire!?"

"Ah! What's this!?"

The fire once again flared up to its maximum capacity. The impact led to the consummation of the instinctive fear of fire and the nerves in Taiga's brain, resulting in the final answer of "Fire = danger = must put out the fire = water".

"I've got it! You pour the water here, right?"

"Wrong!!!"

Ryuuji shouted. Taiga poured an entire glass of water into the frying pan which already had too much oil in the first place, even though a small amount of water was enough to cook the egg.

"Ah!!!"

"Gah!!!"

Large amounts of smoke billowed out alongside the scary explosions of the oil, something that was compounded by the fact that Taiga had poured some oil onto the outside of the frying pan earlier, creating a thick pillar of fire that erupted from the stove..

"Arghhhhhhhhh!"

"The cover!"

Ryuuji threw the pork chops into the frying pan and slammed the cover onto the pan to beat off the pillar of fire. He could still feel the boiling hot water bombarding the inside of the cover, making shockingly loud noises, but Ryuuji determinedly kept the cover on the frying pan. He turned off the stove and waited for the oxygen inside the pan to be depleted.

After numerous seconds...

"Hey... Hey, Takasu, Aisaka, are the two of you alright...?"

"..."

"..."

The kitchen was engulfed in silence.

It took a while for them to realize that a worried Kitamura was standing behind them. Without saying a word, Ryuuji and Taiga stood facing each other and stared into the other's eyes, then...

"Gahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh~!"

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh~!"

The two of them slumped to the floor, hand in hand. Beside them, Kitamura also crouched down, placing his hands on their shoulders worriedly, nodding his head furiously,

"Aisaka's really good at frying eggs! Yes, really good! It's just like magic! The fire just burst towards the ceiling like this... Really good! It really is something you're skilled at! I understand!"

"Sob~Sob~!"

"Wahhhhhh~!"

Taiga's fear-induced wailing and Ryuuji's manly sobs filled the kitchen for the next five minutes. Luckily, it wouldn't lead to a scolding from the landlord since they just averted the danger of burning down the entire apartment complex... But if the apartment complex had really burnt down, it would obviously have been their fault.

The freshly-cooked rice with miso soup, crunchy and succulent pork chops, the mountain of cabbage slices, and...

"Ah! It feels as if these things are emitting an aggressive light...!"

"What are you Ah!-ing for! Didn't you make that!?"

The now brown egg whites had become completely crisp. The egg yolk didn't just change its appearance, but it also became extremely hard, and could only be described as extremely charred. In any case, it was a product which would drive the mother hen that laid the egg crazy, as it gave off a burnt smell that added some unwanted colour to the Takasu residence.

And Kitamura was sitting opposite her, so there was no chance of reversing the situation. Taiga puffed out her cheeks, pulling the plate to her,

"Mm... Alright, I'll eat the lot, so there won't be any objections, right? Add ketchup! I'm going in!"

"Don't be so stubborn, you'll get cancer if you eat something like that. Eat what you can and throw the rest away... it's a waste, but more money would be wasted if you fall sick. Kitamura, just ignore this plate and eat the pork chops that I've fried. Itadakimasu!"

"Itada-kimasu!" The depressed Taiga and the beaming Kitamura followed Ryuuji's lead and picked up their chopsticks.

"Ah!? Hey!"

"This is the dish that Aisaka made specially for me, right? Thank you very much. Since you've made it just for me, I'll take the lot. Even the best chefs screw up sometimes."

In front of the two wide-eyed arsonists, Kitamura swiftly pulled the plate of cancer-inducing compound towards himself, smiling wryly, and began stuffing big portions of the burnt egg into his mouth.

"Ki-Kitamura-kun... Don't eat it! You'll fall sick if you eat any more of that! Actually, I don't know how to cook, and I've never cooked before! Sorry, I lied! And I even said that it was my specialty!"

"Hahaha! I didn't expect it to still taste like a fried egg! This egg that's been over-fried! Haha!"

Kitamura continued to stuff his face with the eggs that couldn't possibly be edible, still laughing happily.

"Ryu-Ryuuji, something's wrong... Kitamura-kun's gone crazy..."

"Pull yourself together, Kitamura! I'll go get some medicine!"

"No, it's alright! I really feel very lucky. I felt even luckier when I heard that it wasn't your specialty. I'm extremely lucky to be able to eat food prepared by Aisaka!"

Isn't this cute?

Ryuuji's inner thoughts were obviously not directed at the naive smiling face of the blond-haired guy.

"Hehe..."

It was directed at Taiga, who had lowered her head and was now blushing furiously, with her eyes in a line.

"Re-Really? That's, really...edible?"

"Yes, of course it's edible. It tastes pretty good!"

"Ah, Ryuuji added the salt and pepper... But, but, but... Hehe... I'm a bit more confident now. I'll work hard to cook for you...some other day. Although I don't think I'll ever be able to cook, I'll try my best to learn. Mm, that's right. I can't be relying on other people forever..."

"I can guarantee that there won't be a problem with Takasu as your teacher."

"Hehehehe..."

Ryuuji, who was drinking his miso soup while looking at the blissful couple, carefully avoided making any unnecessary noises. He suddenly recalled an event in the past, the extremely salty cookies. Taiga tried unsuccessfully to make cookies for Kitamura during home economics class one day, with the cookies eventually ending up in Ryuuji's stomach. Wait, then even before that, Taiga's love letter that was supposed to be for Kitamura was also received by Ryuuji, sparking off this weird period of cohabitation, though the letter itself wasn't put in the envelope in the first place.

That's right! Looking at Taiga, who was blushing furiously while giggling uncontrollably, Ryuuji thought, "The feelings that Taiga wanted to convey have finally reached Kitamura!" The failed product, the fried eggs, reached its destination for the first time in human history - Kitamura's stomach.

"You did it to cheer me up because you were worried about me running away from home, right? Thank you very much, I feel much better now!"

It felt as though the crush was slowly moving towards a wholesome direction, though its angle was a little off. But Taiga was laughing happily, as Kitamura continued eating the burnt eggs while looking at her. *It would be nice if the two of them could reach the stage where "It's good enough like this", just like my feelings towards Minori.*

Just as I was thinking, the whole chain of "Kitamura's loss of control" has resulted in something good. Now the only thing that's left is... Yes, find out

the reason behind that blond-hair and perhaps this whole thing could be resolved.

"Remember to eat the pork chops too, it's full of my love for you."

"Ah, of course! Pork chop sauce, pork chop sauce! Where's the lemon to be squeezed onto the cabbage?"

"We don't eat cabbage that way here."

"Alright! He who stays near ink also gets stained black!"

Biting down on the edge of the fatty part of the pork chop... "H-H-H-Hot! Ah!!! Delicious!" Kitamura shouted happily. Taiga was also more well-behaved than usual, but was still eating in big mouthfuls. Spying an opening, Ryuuji nonchalantly asked,

"Drink the miso soup too, it's good for your health. Anyway, what's with the hair?"

"How should I put it?" Kitamura stopped halfway through the sentence, continuing after drinking a bit of the miso soup,

"Because I don't want to be the student council president."

He said it as if it was no big deal.

"Ju-Just because of that...?"

"Yes. No one would ask me to be student council president if I dyed my hair blond. Although my parents flipped when they saw it."

Now eating the pork chop with smaller bites, Kitamura spoke while commenting about how hot the pork chop was. In front of him, Ryuuji took a deep breath.

Is that true?

Because he didn't want to be student council president, that's why he ran out of the classroom upon hearing about the student council president

elections, then appeared in front of everyone with Kitamura's own version of a "delinquent look" the next day? And he even fought with his parents and ran away from home for that? The almost unnoticeable unease that accompanied this explanation prodded Ryuuji to ask again, but...

"Hehe! What's so bad about that? Just don't run for the elections if you don't want to be the student council president! In any case, you don't have to stay in the student council forever! Even the stupid chihuahua said that!"

In front of the beaming Taiga, Ryuuji could only swallow his question... Was it Ryuuji's misinterpretation? For some reason, the pork chop tasted uncharacteristically bitter...

* * *

"Yayyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy... I'm home... Ahhhh~choo!"

Hearing the sound of the door opening in the doorway, Ryuuji woke up.

Looking at the clock, it was three thirty in the morning, and it seemed that Yasuko was back. The sound of Yasuko discarding her high heels could be heard from the hallway. Listening to Yasuko making her way to her room with unsteady footsteps, Ryuuji thought, "It should be alright to leave her to her own devices" and crawled back into bed.

"Ahhhh..."

"...Gah!"

A female voice was heard, but it wasn't Yasuko. Ryuuji jumped out of bed.

Walking around Kitamura, who was sleeping on the floor, Ryuuji made his way to Yasuko's room. He turned on the light...

"So soft... So soft... Ahhhhhh~"

"So, So uncomfortable...! Such a strong smell of alcohol~!"

Just as he thought. "Gah..." Ryuuji rubbed his eyes and scratched his head.

Yasuko had said to Taiga before she went to work, "It's rare to have a friend who's staying over, so Taiga-chan should also sleep over tonight~. Just take out one more futon in Ya-chan's room~." Since she had said it, of course Taiga would have followed her instructions, sleeping over after taking out an extra futon in Yasuko's room.

"Don't just stand there and look, come and save me! Argh, I'm getting drunk just by smelling the alcohol...!"

"Oh, right!"

The extremely drunk Yasuko had jumped straight into Taiga's futon, totally ignoring the one already laid out for her. Taiga had borrowed Ryuuji's large hooded T-shirt and sports pants as pajamas. Yasuko gave off a smell of alcohol so strong that one got a headache just by smelling it, and she hugged Taiga tightly while rolling around in the futon. Taiga was suffocating from the lack of oxygen caused by the strong smell of alcohol and from being trapped in the futon.

Ryuuji laboriously loosened the drunken grip that Yasuko had on Taiga's arm. Finally, Taiga was able to climb out of the futon. Yasuko stretched her scantily-clothed body and said,

"Sleep...Ryu...I...Sleep...Give..."

Yasuko used her long fingernails to keep her cleavage that was threatening to spill out of her shirt in place. Ryuuji, being a son without any special interests, merely said,

"I can't stand it, you look really bad."

Ryuuji, who had no idea what to do, yawned loudly. Taiga, whose hair was in a mess, opened her mouth widely to yawn in agreement.

"Darn... I was woken up~. Ahhhhh..."

She bit down on the overly-long sleeve of the T-shirt like a child,

"What is Ya-chan saying...? Can you understand her?"

"She said, 'Water... Ryu-chan, give me water... I want it with ice.'"

"No wonder you're her son... I want to drink water too, do we have iced barley tea?"

"Yes we do. I made some before sleeping."

The two of them stumbled towards the kitchen, guided only by the light from Yasuko's room. Taiga brought out the glasses while Ryuuji opened the refrigerator...

"Huh? The barley tea's gone... Even the bottle's gone..."

"Ah! This!"

Taiga found the empty glass bottle in question residing in the sink. Only the tea bag remained at the bottom of the bottle. Under such circumstances, the criminal could only be...

"Damn that Kitamura! How could he finish all of the tea while we were sleeping!? We could make another bottle by adding water... This is the spoiled brat that grew up under the protection of his parents...? Ah, even the ice cubes are gone! Why does he need ice for an iced drink? And he didn't even bother to make a new batch of ice..."

Ryuuji couldn't help but sigh in response to the empty ice box. During this time, Yasuko was still shouting, "Water~" Although there was water in the BRITA water bottle, un-iced water would probably be insufficient to satisfy the drunkard.

"No choice, I'll have to make a trip to the convenience store, at least it's closer than the vending machines. Do you have anything you want to buy?"

"Yogurt! Ah, no, pudding! No, cream puff! Chocolate electric cream puff? Sweet coffee? Ice crea...? Wah! What do I do! My head hurts..."

"...Why don't you just come along."

With only the house key and wallet in his pocket, Ryuuji and Taiga slipped on slippers and prepared to leave the house as quietly as possible.

"It's so exciting to go out of the house at this time... Ah, that's right, let's get Kitamura-kun to come with us?"

"He should be sleeping."

"Let's just try to call him."

Nodding to each other, the two of them went back to Ryuuji's room.

"Gah! There's a smelly odour in this room..."

"It's none of your business!"

Only turning on the table lamp, the two of them crouched down beside Kitamura's pillow. Kitamura pulled the blanket up to his mouth, snoring as he slept soundly. Taiga bit into the sleeve of her T-shirt and giggled soundlessly,

"Hehe... Kitamura-kun's sleeping face..."

"Hey, what about our initial objective? You perverted woman..."

They pulled off the blanket lightly, just like in the television shows where they play pranks on sleeping people to wake them up. It was a pity that Minori wasn't present, as she would surely shout "GOOOOOD MORNING!!!", complete with a safety helmet and microphone. Underneath the blanket, Kitamura's glasses-less sleeping face was revealed.

And then, Ryuuji and Taiga finally understood the reason behind Kitamura finishing the barley tea, and also the reason behind the disappearing ice cubes. They weren't able to say anything, or even sigh, so they just lapsed into an uncomfortable silence.

Placed beside the pillow... No, it should have slipped from his hand after he fell asleep, for the wet object was a plastic bag containing the melted ice. It was probably used by Kitamura to cover up any evidence of him having cried in the night over an hour ago. He drank the barley tea to make up for the loss of water.

Kitamura was crying not too long ago.

The towel that Ryuuji had placed on top of the pillow was already wet. Tear streaks could still be seen on his face and the corner of his eyes. Kitamura had stuffed the towel into his mouth, biting down on it. He had probably just fallen asleep, having cried his eyes out soundlessly in the night where Ryuuji and Taiga were both sleeping soundly, not wanting anyone to find out.

The footsteps of the two echoed in the empty street.

"It's a bit dangerous at this time, don't stray too far away."

"..."

Taiga was dragging her feet a small distance behind Ryuuji, moving forward at a snail's pace that was so slow that she couldn't even catch up with the white mist she breathed out.

Although there should still be a while more before winter truly set in, the late night air was already rather cold. On the streets that were devoid of any human presence, in the small alleyways that even homeless cats wouldn't set foot in, no windows were open, and the road in the housing district disregarded the presence of Ryuuji and Taiga, preferring to slumber by itself. The surroundings were dead quiet.

"Taiga..."

Ryuuji called Taiga's name. Taiga lowered her head, looking as though she was about to stop walking, her messy long hair covering the expression on her pearly face.

Ryuuji walked back a few steps, grabbing the sleeve of the hooded t-shirt that he lent her. Taiga didn't shake off his hold, and finally stopped walking.

"What... What am I so happy about? And I was so excited... I'm such an idi...ot."

Taiga's hair whorl was facing Ryuuji, and both her shoulders and voice were trembling, but not because of the cold. The voice that regretted her own foolishness disappeared into the silent night.

"I don't know anything, don't notice anything, Kitamura's pain and sadness... I didn't find out...anything... I can't... I am...not good enough..."

"Why wouldn't you be good enough?"

"Not good enough...!"

Tears fell onto the small, uncovered feet that should have already been hurting from the freezing cold. Ryuuji witnessed the tears that didn't even appear when she was abandoned by her father.

All the sorrows of the past were rained down like a heavy downpour on the petite figure of Taiga, but her heart was still like a patch of robust and fertile soil, continually absorbing the rainwater while growing. But the amount of water absorbed had finally burst past the limit, the excess water had flowed out of the soil. Quietly, each drop of Taiga's tears made a circular-shaped, transparent mark on the asphalt road.

"Someone like me has no right to like him...!"

Some hours before daybreak, an irrepressible sob rose up on the street. Ryuuji only looked at Taiga's hair whorl, still clutching the overly-long sleeve of the T-shirt. He was also unable to continue moving forward.

Taiga used the sleeve that was not gripped by Ryuuji to wipe her face forcefully, suppressing her own voice while bending down painfully. *If you don't have the right, then neither do I.* Ryuuji stood there at a loss of what to do, not knowing how to comfort Taiga, still gripping the sleeve of her T-shirt.

Didn't Ami also mention this, "Someone will come and save you if you cry loud enough." Ryuuji thought that it was very true. The weird, serious, honest and gentle Kitamura had many likable attributes, and because he was "that kind of person", Taiga and Ryuuji, both of whom liked Kitamura, wanted to save him when he was crying. No matter what Kitamura did, they would still want to help him - Ami was right on this point. This was why Ryuuji was unable to rebut Ami, who accused Kitamura of being too naive. Because they liked Kitamura, they accepted his rashness. Even if Kitamura was taking advantage of everyone's love towards him by crying, Ryuuji and the others would still want to help him.

But the problem was... He was obviously crying, so what should the group of idiots who hadn't noticed do?

Even if they wanted to help him, even if they wanted him to act rashly, what could they do if they couldn't hear the sounds of him crying?

Just what should the kids that wanted to become "the last hope", but were unable to do anything to help do?



Ryuuji's body jerked uncontrollably... Tears threatened to overwhelm his eyes.

At the last moment, Ryuuji lifted his head and looked at the dark sky overhead. Few constellations could be seen from the streets, where the air was extremely dirty, and where isolated stars shone brightly, responding to Taiga's sorrowful cries.

"Taiga, look, it's the Big Dipper. That's the polestar... and Orion."

Wasn't there a song called looking up at something...? Ryuuji forced out a melody from memory, sticking his hand inside the sleeve of the hooded T-shirt to grab hold of Taiga's freezing fingers.

Taiga lifted her head, her red nose and tear-stained eyelashes revealed by the streetlamp. The beautiful face gifted by the gods had been disfigured by the tears, but it wasn't of consequence as Ryuuji pointed to the night sky. *As long as you look up, your tears will never fall.*

The iron-willed Taiga once again stepped forward.

Although tears would flow once in a while, it was alright.

Ryuuji was very clear about that, because he had always been beside Taiga, and bore witness to the fact that no matter how many seasons came and went, no matter how many lonely nights passed, and no matter how many times of laughter, fun, and sorrow they had, Taiga had never been defeated before, which was why Ryuuji knew, and he also believed.

"Which one? Which one is Orion?"

Ryuuji replied,

"The one with three stars in a line. Do you see it?"

"Ah... I see it... It's over there."

Lifting her head to look at the freezing sky, Taiga's fingers squeezed Ryuuji's hand a bit tighter. Ryuuji knew that even though Taiga's face was

full of tear lines, her heart had already recovered her strength, and she only needed a bit of time before she was ready to move forward once again.

"Didn't we learn about the distance between stars in primary school?"

"Mm, it's 'how many light years' right?"

"That stands for the number of years it takes for that beam of light to reach the earth, right? So the Orion or the Big Dipper that we're seeing now could have already disappeared... Even if they explode and disappear now, it will still take us more than ten thousand years to know that it has disappeared. The stars that we're seeing now, that we believe in...could have disappeared a long time ago."

As if for confirmation, Taiga held Ryuuji's hand even more tightly. *Must be strong, not like this, must be stronger, stronger, stronger, stronger, stronger! Must be even stronger!* She wanted to shout something like this.

"Just like Kitamura-kun and I, what is seen by the eyes of other people isn't true... How many years, how many thousands of years must it take for the truth to be known? Just how far is the distance between Kitamura-kun and I?"

"You want to shorten the distance between him and you, right? Because you like him, that's why you want to know everything about him."

"Mm..."

Taiga didn't nod her head, only responding while still looking up at the night sky. Still holding on to her hand, Ryuuji also looked up at the same star, saying softly,

"Everyone's the same, everyone's afraid of being far away from other people. Once you like someone, you would wish to shorten the distance between the other person and you, which is why you stretch out your hand towards the other person..."

Just like the two of them right now, only when in direct contact can they not miss any disturbance of the heart, only when in direct contact can they experience every joy and sorrow together.

"Only like this can we let our souls come into direct contact with each other. Let's work hard together...and see what our efforts result in."

He thought of the girl who whispered that she was afraid.

And also thought of the boy who suppressed the sound of his cries.

Although he had thought of other people, in this moment, he only thought of Taiga, whose fingers were interlocked with his.

To understand each other is like a miracle. For two people to understand each other and to fall in love is so hard that it would take a miracle and divine grace to happen. Every pair of lovers, friends, husband and wife, parent and child, and siblings in the world were all miracles. Ryuuji quietly closed his eyes. It was hard to understand, but it was valued because of its difficulty.

One hundred seconds to once again stepping out towards the convenience store.

Ten thousand seconds to daybreak.

Chapter 4

"...?"

The continuation of a dream. Knowing that you have to go to primary school for lessons, but no matter how carefully you cycle, you'll always end up on the wrong street, never being able to reach school. Such illusion-like feelings of desperation melted away in the soft sunlight peeking through a gap in the curtains.

Oh right, I'm already in high school, so I don't need to go to primary school anymore.

It was morning.

"Good morning, Takasu."

"Oh..."

Ryuuji slowly stretched out his neck to look at the clock beside him, but the familiar clock was not in its usual position. *Now I won't be able to know the time...*

"Huh!?"

Ryuuji suddenly jumped up from his bed - he wasn't in his own room, but in the living room that was connected to the kitchen.

"Sorry, I drank all the milk in the refrigerator."

Three whole seconds passed before Ryuuji recognized the blond-haired guy whose breath smelled of milk and wore his long-sleeve t-shirt and track pants in front of him. *Oh right...* He finally remembered everything while rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"The two of you are too cunning! Looks like you two had fun during the night. Why didn't you call me along? I would have liked to go with the two of you!"

Kitamura pouted unhappily, while Ryuuji unconsciously stared at his face.

"Wh-What's wrong?"

"No...nothing. Good morning..."

It's because you were crying! But he couldn't say it. The expression on Kitamura's face that said that nothing was wrong was rather irritating. *Since you're acting like this, I'll pretend that I don't know anything as well, for this is what real men do.* Ryuuji scratched his head, slowly floating back to reality. As he became more awake and more aware of the situation, the creases on his eyebrows grew deeper.

His last memory of the night was of Taiga separating the cheese cod into three servings, but only eating the cod. *Ah, what a strange woman...* Ryuuji seemed to have fallen asleep beside the low table while watching her eat.

Ryuuji used the cushion as a pillow, his body extremely sore from the cold. The sorry state of the low table was also extremely embarrassing to Ryuuji. The remains of the cup noodles, cheese puffs, yogurt and other foodstuffs bought from the convenience store last night gave off a bad smell in tandem with the single-use chopsticks. *Oh! Single-use chopsticks...! It was too late to be afraid. Yet another patch of rain forest has disappeared...!*

"Darn it! You actually saw my room like this...now I'm extremely embarrassed!"

"Cheer up, it's nothing. My room is normally like this too, and my house would be polluted by rubbish from the convenience store when my brother's friends come over to play mahjong."

"AH!!!" Ryuuji screamed while shaking his head vigorously.

"That's not the problem! Even if every home on earth allows such pollution, I'll never allow such a thing in my home! And to tell the truth, I won't allow any home on earth to be so dirty and messy!"

"I-Is that so? I'm sorry!"

"No!!! You don't have to apologize! It's true that my home is dirty and messy right now! Please kill me if I don't clean everything up in thirty seconds! Or I won't be able to face this earth!"

"Okay..."

Ryuuji prepared to get up, but found that something heavy was pressing down on his leg. The leg in question was already numb from the cold. The girl who was still asleep, using the environmentalist Ryuuji's leg as a pillow was none other than Taiga. The weight of her head had cut off all blood flow in Ryuuji's leg; it was no longer a problem of numbness. Taiga probably fell asleep at around the same time as Ryuuji did...seeing as she still clutched a piece of cod in her hand.

Wait, the numbness in my leg and why we're asleep in this position isn't important. The important thing is, how could I let an innocent teenage girl's crush see her sleeping on another man's leg!? Now's not the time to discuss whether Taiga's an innocent teenage girl or not! Ryuuji hurriedly shook Taiga's head forcefully,

"Taiga! Wake up! You look extremely bad!"

Ryuuji's angry and edgy look was all for Taiga's own good, but...

"It's alright, it'll be too mean to wake her up when she's sleeping so soundly, right?"

The ignorant Kitamura put on a good guy face and stopped Ryuuji's actions, instead lightly shifting Taiga's head to a cushion. Taiga gave a contented mew, curling her body into a C-shape, once again falling into a deep slumber.

"Look at how contented her sleeping face is...her face is really cute, and her eyelashes are so long."

"Please say that to her after she wakes up..."

"I'd be too embarrassed, and it'll be sexual harassment. But her sleeping figure emits a peaceful aura, almost as if one could be unburdened of all sins just by looking at her..."

Kitamura smiled with a gentle expression on his face, lowering his head to look at Taiga's sleeping face. Ryuuji didn't say anything, but thought, *You're actually the same as her!*

Taiga and Ryuuji didn't notice Kitamura's sorrows, and similarly, Kitamura also did not know of Taiga's complicated inner feelings and the honest, messy and blundering feelings of love. Everyone is like this, everyone must be the same. Even though comfort could be obtained by saying that everyone was the same, the pain would not be lightened in any way.

Crack! His numb shoulder made a sound.

"What time is it? Ah! It's already past eleven!"

Ryuuji was surprised at the time. He had originally thought that it was nine o'clock at most, not knowing that his precious Saturday morning had already disappeared.

"I just woke up too, it's really too late. Ah, So now... Hell's car!

"Huhhhhhhh!?"

Kitamura suddenly grabbed hold of Ryuuji with his softball toned arms, tightly locking his limbs in place and threw Ryuuji towards the kitchen violently. Because it happened so suddenly, Ryuuji, who was now lying on the floor, even forgot about the mandatory complaint. *What exactly is this?* Such violence right after waking up, such actions, more importantly, the emotion... It was impossible to connect these to the guy who had cried alone in the middle of the night. But thanks to Kitamura's random act of violence, Ryuuji's feeling of tiredness was gone in an instant.

"What... What are you trying to do!?"

"Huh? It's been thirty seconds, so I'm giving you your death sentence. Ah, you're still breathing."

"Stop it, you idiot! You don't need a brain to know that I was joking!"

"My death sentence isn't a joke! Giant Swing!"

"Argh...!"

"It's very dangerous, so remember to protect your head!"

If it's dangerous then don't do it! As Ryuuji's body was still in slumber-mode, his legs were easily grabbed, and he suddenly started spinning. Ryuuji quickly covered his head with his arms. *A quick death leads to a quick reincarnation.* Ryuuji could only pray for that, giving up on any futile resistance. *Why do I have to be involved in something like this... Ah... Is it because I damaged the environment? If that's it, then I'll gladly sacrifice my body for the sins of mankind...* Ryuuji closed his eyes, reveling in the feeling of being a martyr, not expecting his body to fly towards an unexpected destination.

"Gahhhhh!?"

He smashed into the door separating Yasuko's room and the living room. Out of the corner of his eyes, Ryuuji saw Kitamura breathe out in surprise before flying backwards towards a 10-point landing on the floor.

The reason being...

"Ugu...ugu..."

The girl who should have been sleeping peacefully had slapped her crush unhesitatingly, giving him the same fate as the criminal who had undergone the "Giant Swing". And she was currently standing up.

Her light-coloured hair rose and fell in perfect sync with her breathing, her eyes puffy and swollen, but whether it was due her crying before sleeping or excess salt, an extremely inauspicious light emanating from beneath

her eyelids. Her stumbling form showed that this was a subconscious violent reaction.

The fact that two guys were trembling in fear probably didn't even register in her mind. Still half-asleep, the monster that stood with her legs apart opened her eyes that were naturally devoid of human reason, lifting them to the sky to look at an invisible moon. *Bam!* The invisible restraints on her lower jaw were broken, and the blood-soaked fangs finally revealed themselves, giving the fingers that still had pieces of cod on them monstrous strength. And then came the primitive roar of a monster,

"IT'S-SO-NOISY...!"

This was the "humanoid interface fighting machine"... No, it was the Palmtop Tiger.

"Oh... You're finally awake...!"

Kitamura scrunched his eyes, and crouched in front of the violent sleepwalking girl, using his hands to shield his eyes from the brilliant light. But there was no source of light in the apartment, since the sun had been blocked by Taiga's apartment complex, totally depriving Ryuuji's apartment of any sunlight. Ryuuji merely pushed Kitamura, who was having fun by himself, to the side,

"Taiga... Taiga. Come here, come..."

"Ugu...?"

"Look...here's something that you really like. Cold...blueberry flavor..."

"Ugu, Ugu ugu..."

Ryuuji opened the refrigerator to show the half-asleep and dangerous tiger its contents. He took out the BULGARIA yogurt that he bought from the convenience store last night, no, this morning... Taiga stumbled towards Ryuuji slowly, her eyes focusing on the cold drink in Ryuuji's hands.

"Here, drink up. It's yours, so it's alright if you finish the whole thing."

"Ugu... Ugu...? Ugu!"

The delicate hands tightly grasped the yogurt, sticking the straw into the opening. The tiny mouth sucked out the contents of the container forcefully, and her throat made a "Gulp!" sound, bringing back a shred of humanity in Taiga's eyes.

"Ah~! It's good! Give me another bottle!"

She finally started conversing in a human language.

"There isn't any left."

"Huh!? You're so stingy! Then give me milk!"

"Sorry, Aisaka, I finished the milk."

"Huh!? What right do you have to finish my dairy product... Ah!!!"

What are you ah-ing about? In front of the stupefied Ryuuji, Taiga finally woke up and took stock of the situation,

"Ki-Ki-Ki-Ki-Ki-Kitamura-kun!? Ah!!! Gah!!! Argh!!! Did, Did, Did you see my embarrassing sleeping face!?"

She started to wipe her mouth...using the sleeve of Ryuuji's hooded t-shirt.

"Sorry, but I saw it. But that's Aisaka's fault for sleeping there."

"Ah... Ryuuji, what do I do!? I'm going to die from the shame!!! He saw me sleeping!!!"

"Other than seeing you sleep, you sla...never mind, it's nothing..."

Taiga, who had just slapped Kitamura with all her strength a few moments ago, was now extremely embarrassed by having been seen sleeping by her crush, and hid behind Ryuuji, wailing "So embarrassing!" while stamping her feet.

"Ah, this is the worst possible situation!!! My hair's in a mess too!!!"

"Ah!" Taiga ran screaming into Yasuko's room, shutting the door with a loud *Bang!*, probably to hide in the empty futon beside the sleeping Yasuko. *At least now she finally realizes how clumsy she really is.*

"What are you so flustered about...idiot!"

"But that slap was just enough to clear my mind."

The two friends folded their arms in front of their chests and nodded in agreement, but the worst was yet to come.

"Huh...!?"

"Gah...!"

The person who pulled open the door looked like a deliveryman. The deliveryman held the parcel, Taiga, in one hand. Her unfurled curls flowed in all directions, and the area below her eyes appeared to be black by virtue of the combination of sweat and oil. Her face, now devoid of makeup, looked extremely oily and shiny, but the area around her eyes, lips, and nose all had wrinkles due to extremely dry skin. Probably because of the cold, she wore Ryuuji's middle school gym shirt on top of her black lace top, but her bra, which was undone at the back, spilled out of the top. The lower half of her body was still clad in a miniskirt, but the zipper on the front was pulled down halfway, through which her pink underwear cheerily winked at everyone.



The person in question was Ryuuji's mother.

"..."

Dong! Yasuko didn't say anything, but placed Taiga on the ground, and grappled for her handbag that laid by her pillow with her eyes half-closed, pulling out her golden-colored wallet.

"..."

She took out three one thousand yen notes, and gave one to each of the children present.

"..."

She stuck out her thumb and pointed to the doorway.

The drunk breadwinner of the family once again disappeared behind the door. Ryuuji started to clear up the mess in the living room as quietly as a thief so as to avoid disrupting the sleep of the sole breadwinner of the family, while Kitamura showered with a trickle of water, and Taiga stumbled home, trying to make as little noise as possible, to change and shower.

Alright, everyone has a budget of a thousand yen, better stay out for as long as possible.

* * *

"I'm very sorry, it's the peak hour for the restaurant, so we're unable to issue separate receipts by person! Italian hamburger and rice, combo meal with soft drink, mushroom-baked rice and soft drink, a salad, a Hawaiian pumpkin cake, and chocolate cake. That will be a total of three thousand three hundred and thirteen yen! Received ten thousand yen! Please confirm! Heh! I'll return you five thousand, six thousand yen in

change first, then another six hundred and eighty seven yen! Please check! This is your receipt! Thank you for eating here, please come again! Welcome! The smoking area is full right now, so please allow me to take you to the table by the window in the non-smoking zone! Why are you guys here!?"

"We've already waited for a long time, Minorin..."

"You didn't notice us at all?"

"Anyway, why can't you issue separate receipts? I'm rather bothered by that."

To avoid disrupting Yasuko's beauty sleep, after showering and changing into fresh clothes, the three of them went out to look for a place to eat breakfast - that is, the family restaurant that Minori worked part time at which they were extremely familiar with.

"Ah, I can only flip off the switch that controls my human behavior to go into total mechanical service mode during lunch hour~ Huh? Kitamura-kun!? W-W-Why have you appeared here as if nothing happened!? I've been extremely worried about you!? Hey, what's with that hair!"

"I'm sorry, because of many reasons, I'm currently running away from home and staying in Takasu's home. "

"Of course there would be many reasons! But at least you look okay! I'm relieved!"

"Sorry for making you worry."

The apologetic Kitamura scratched his blond-colored head. He had borrowed Ryuuji's hooded t-shirt and track pants, looking to be more casual than before. Taiga was also rather energetic,

"Minorin, has your shift finished yet? We'll wait for you while eating lunch, so let's find a place to hang out afterward!"

Taiga had put on a snowy white woolen sweater on top of a red one piece lace dress with a lot more lace than usual. Was Taiga trying to cover up her embarrassing misdemeanor not too long ago? She even put on an orange-colored lip balm in a bid to appear cute. It'd be good if that lip balm didn't end up in her nose. Ryuuji was clad in a hooded t-shirt and jeans as per normal and was scrutinizing Minori from head to toe, who had her hair in a ponytail and was in a waitress uniform.

"Ah, I can't as my shift is from 11 am to 8 pm. I'm sorry, so just leave me out for today, please sit here~."

"Huh~! What are you trying to do, that's such a pity..."

I feel that it's such a pity too... Ryuuji looked at the back of Minori's neck and sighed.

"If you don't mind, then just let that woman over there take my place!"

The three people followed Minori's line of sight, and widened their eyes in surprise.

She sat alone at the single seater in the non-smoking zone, shutting herself out from the outside world with a pair of white earphones, with one hand on the wheel of her iPod while the other hand rolled some spaghetti onto her fork. Her beautiful face was expressionless, as if she was extremely bored. She totally ignored the white-hot gazes that she was attracting. She wasn't wearing makeup, and was clothed in a woolen sweater and jeans, wearing a pair of heel-less ballet shoes and a look which when put on someone other than a real beauty would only turn that person into a plain-looking middle-aged woman. It was to the credit of the famous model that she was able to put together such a perfect casual image. Her presence alone turned the family restaurant into a cafe in Paris, and the faces of other customers into simple drawings.

This was the lunch that the beautiful girl, Kawashima Ami ate on Saturday by herself. The corners of Taiga's mouth curled up wickedly at the scene,

"Ahhhhhh, and here I was, thinking who could it be. Isn't this the stupid chihuahua? Why are you so lonely as to be eating spaghetti by yourself on a Saturday?"

Her tone immediately changed to one of provocation. But Ami was listening to her music and didn't hear Taiga. She looked in the other direction while eating her salad, tapping her shoes to the beat of her music.

"Huh? You can't hear me? Hey!!! Stupid chihuahua!!! The lonely stupid chihuahua who doesn't have work on a rest day!!!"

"..."

Ami still didn't notice her. Taiga was preparing to raise the volume of her voice to an even greater level when Kitamura finally intervened. The childhood friend who was naive, gentle and always acting as the older brother...

"Hey, slacker! Slac-ker! The slacker who's currently not working!"

"Ki, Kitamura...? What's wrong?"

"Ami is a slacker, an unpopular slacker who has no work to do! The poor model who has no work!"

"That's right, that's right! Stupid chihuahua's a slacker! A model who has nothing to do! Slacker chi..."

Even Taiga started to follow Kitamura's lead happily, starting to chant "slacker, slacker", their combined voices coming together in a jarring melody.

"Slac~ker~all~the~people~..."

"Kitamura's so good! So clever!"

The blond-haired idiot and the stupid tiger clapped their hands happily, revolving around Ami, who was completely oblivious to the situation, while

making noise and jumping around smiling at each other. Even Minori wrinkled her eyebrows and said,

"Wh-What's wrong!? Kitamura-kun, what you just said was not funny at all! Could it be that blond-hair resulted in a loss of your sense of humor...?"

"That can't be it, right? Kitamura was never much of a humourous guy... The important thing is that you're being called by that table over there."

"Ah!" Minori immediately put on her waitress expression, and hurried off to take the order. As he watched her move away, Ryuuji thought that the reason for Kitamura's actions should be because of the anger at Ami's scolding in the lecture room the other day boiling over now, right? Right now, Kitamura was no longer the saint who didn't scold nor argue with people, and he had the backing of Taiga, whom everyone named "The Aristocrat of the Vulgar Realm".

"I don't have a job, so I'm-slack-ing~"

"I love modeling! But I don't have jobs! I'm eating alone by myself! Ahhhhhh... Sobsobsobsob... Ahhhhhh... Sobsobsobsob... I don't have a job, so please open for business~."

"It's not good to be so free! If you don't be a model! You'll be slacking forever! The slacker who eats by herself! So relaxed! So relaxed! So relaxed! Hehe! Alone! Alone! Alone! Sobsobsobsob~"

The two of them even broke new ground, creating a song to mock Ami. With Taiga, who was smiling evilly like a loyal magic familiar as a companion, Kitamura even snatched Ami's handkerchief to use as a microphone, his butt shaking from one side to another, and just as he was preparing for a new wave of irritating laughter...

"You're so irritating that I can't even pretend to not be able to hear you! Idiot!"

"Ah!!!"

Ami splashed the rest of her iced water onto Kitamura's face. Actually, most of the water was gone, with most of the contents of the glass being ice, so only Kitamura's cheeks and chin were wet. But it's still probably cold, right? Kitamura's face was pale, as he frantically attempted to pry out the ice cubes that had gotten into his collar.

Taiga used the empty glass to knock Ami on the head,

"So you were able to hear us from the beginning, then why were you acting like you didn't notice us? Stupid!"

"That hurts!"

The glass was immediately snatched away.

"Ah, it's already busy enough during lunch hour, and you guys are still adding to my workload! The floor is wet! Darn it!"

"It's all Yuusaku's and the mini tiger's fault~!"

"Alright alright, don't fight, sit down! Ami, you go and sit with them, it's wet here, I have to clean up! Hurry up. Hey, girl, move your butt!"

Minori's hardworking mode was three times as efficient as normal, as she chased away the four people with a mop, ushering them into a table by the window. Minori also moved Ami's unfinished spaghetti and salad over.

"Call me when you've decided on what to order! I'll give you an extra large serving of fries!"

Minori whispered the last part of that sentence while putting three sets of menus onto the table with a swan-like flourish.

"But I don't want to sit with you guys!?"

"Oh~look at this! It says 'big mushroom gathering'... Mushroom-baked rice, mushroom hamburger, and mushroom spagetti! They all contain very little calories, so maybe I can get dessert..."

"You want to eat dessert here? Didn't you want to go to the coffee shop in front of the train station?"

"I, I want to order something warm... Something that'll warm my body up...! I'm freezing! I'm dying!"

"Would the mushroom-baked rice be good?"

"Don't want the mushroom-baked rice."

"...No one's listening to me! That's why I hate being together with you people!"

"Humph!" Ami rashly finished the rest of her spaghetti, appearing to be in a bad mood. Her beautiful face revealed an extremely unhappy expression as she turned away.

"I'll have the beef okonomiyaki and a drink. Kawashima, why are you alone today? No work?"

Ryuuji, who asked the question seriously, also received a glare from Ami,

"I'm...resting! I'm human too, can't I rest sometimes!?"

"Why are you so emotional...?"

"Yeah, that's so scary. Stupid chihuahua's in a bad mood today?"

"It's more her lousy personality than her emotions."

"Shut up! You guys are very pleased with yourselves, right, especially that blond-haired guy over there! Anyone would be unhappy if they were being repeatedly labeled a slacker! Seriously...what's wrong with eating alone on a Saturday? Is it a crime to do so!?"

No, no, it's not a crime~. The other occupants of the table turned their gazes back to their menus. Ami crossed her legs in annoyance,

"Humph...! I'm still in high school, and how would I be a professional if I don't rest appropriately? I can only study, prepare for exams, and go to

the beauty centre or the gym in my free time. In the past, yes, before transferring here, my work wasn't just normal photo-taking, I still had to take photos for magazine covers, it was like 'I'm going on the cover again~?', I had no time to rest... Ah, right! If not for that perverted stalker forcing me to take two whole months of leave from the agency, I would be on the cover this month! In any case, Ami-chan hasn't gone on the cover even once after her leave!? What's going on!? Do you mean that the cover with Ami-chan's face won't sell well!? Damn...those bastards who look down on my abilities!"

The "slacker attack" seemed to have triggered a landmine. Taiga, who had set it off, sat quietly beside Ryuuji, at a loss of what to do, facing the extremely frustrated Ami,

"Stupid chihuahua... Alright, I'll treat you to a drink. Since you're so pitiful that you couldn't even afford a two hundred and eighty yen drink..."

She deliberately made a pained expression, pressing down on her flat chest. Ami screamed shrilly, almost exploding in anger,

"I'm not drinking water because I'm too poor to order anything else! Water is good for removing toxins from your body! I'm drinking water to nourish my body! Stupid little tiger! Ah, you're so annoying! I'll let you treat me! I'll let you treat me!"

Ami stood up angrily and stomped towards the drinks bar. Ryuuji saw it and hurriedly called after her,

"Hey! You have to order first!"

Waving to the working Minori, they ordered "okonomiyaki, creamy mushroom rice in white sauce, Mushroom-baked rice...and four drinks". The ordering was complete.

As they hadn't brought along anything valuable enough to be stolen, the four of them left their seats at the same time to congregate around the drinks bar like sheep alongside a river.

"Where do we go after lunch?"

"Mm... It's embarrassing to say this, but I don't have any money since I ran away from home. The money that Yasuko-san gave me is barely enough for the meal... Ah~ it's freezing! Coffee coffee!"

"Then let's go to someplace warm, we can't keep staring at Minorin here. Where's the thing you use to pick up ice cubes that looks like a clothes hanger?"

"You mean the tongs? It's here, give me your cup, I'll help you get some in a bit... Kawashima? Do you have any place you want to go?"

"Mm... The one with zero calories is...huh!? When did this happen!? Why have I been included!?"

"Aren't you very free today? To tell the truth, Kitamura-kun looks more energetic with you around. Though I don't like you, I'll still allow you to come with us. You can come along to help cheer Kitamura-kun up!"

"Wait a minute, this is too far away from what I thought... Yuusaku's reaction just now was energetic? And the most important thing is, didn't I tell you two not to get involved with him? You guys totally ignored my words!"

"You're already too deeply involved to turn back now. Look at that face, his lips are turning blue because you splashed ice water on him..."

"I don't want to! He asked for it!"

The four people added another level of noise onto the already noisy restaurant during lunch hour.

To cheer Kitamura-kun up is the most important thing right now. She was willing to do anything to achieve that.

Taiga came to this decision while munching on the electric chocolate cheese puff. At four o'clock in the morning, nearing daybreak, Ryuuji had

the same line of thought as her. "For Kitamura, we must work hard!" The two people that were gorging themselves with food made the promise.

But...

"How has that promise progressed?"

"He, He looks very energetic...in a way..."

"You should help to do something too..."

"I was about to say the same thing to you..."

In front of the two who were sitting side by side on the cold bench, on the other side of the green protective fence, the two childhood friends were conversing with dark expressions on their faces.

"Why did you miss again! How can you miss a 70 km/h ball? Ami, are you even looking at the ball? Why aren't you more serious about this!? Why are you afraid of giving your all!? When did this kind of thing become popular in Japan!?"

"I'm very serious about it! And this is my first time holding a bat, isn't it normal not to be able to hit anything!? And you're the one who suggested this place, so why am I the one batting!? Can't you bat by yourself!"

"Everyone's equal in the strike zone. This rule will always hold true in the strike zone! It is because of this rule that the batter is able to step into the strike zone! And bat! Everyone in the strike zone is a batter! Hey! Look in front of you! The ball's coming! Look carefully! Focus on it! Heyyyyy! If you don't pay attention, it'll hit you!"

"Huh!? Wa-Wa-Wa-Wa-Wa-Wa-Wa-Wa-Wait!?"

Whoosh! The wild swing of the bat missed for the fifth time in a row. Kitamura, who was acting as the coach, arrogantly crouched down in front of the control panel. "What are you doing!?", he yelled as he ruffled his golden hair and stamped his feet in frustration,

"Didn't I tell you to focus on the ball! Why can't you do such a simple thing!"

"Because you've been distracting me by talking so much!"

"Kushieda's a girl too, and she can easily hit a ball that's going 140 km/h!"

"Minori's always been a baseball girl! Ah! That hurts! Ow ow ow! Did you just hit me with the baseball bat!?"

"You're unable to focus because you keep complaining! Heads up, the ball's coming again! You must concentrate and hit the ball this time!"

"Takasu-kun saw it too, right!? This guy just hit my butt with the baseball bat!"

Yes I saw it, and I can't believe that there are still people who hit other people's butts with baseball bats in this day and age. Ryuuji nodded in affirmation, hugging his knees and curling up on the bench. The dilapidated softball practice centre was situated on the edge of a golf course, and only had one strike zone. Whether it was the result of the lack of sunlight, or the natural production of cold air by concrete structures, or the polluted air surrounding the place, it felt as though the practice centre was even colder than the streets. The bored Taiga also hugged her legs in the same position, sniffing loudly.

When Kitamura suggested going to the soft/baseball practice centre, we thought that he wanted to have a change of emotions by exercising, and felt that it was very healthy and wholesome. Everything was fine when everyone was walking to the centre, but once we reached the centre, Kitamura immediately called Ami up to the strike zone and started to roleplay the part of the coach from hell. Although Kitamura's spirited display was reassuring, Ryuuji felt that it was going in the opposite direction from healthy and wholesome.

"Don't you think that Kitamura seems to have changed into another person?"

"I felt that way too when you were teaching me how to fry eggs."

"Anyone would be distressed if the house was going to be burned down, right..."

"Ah, the stupid chihuahua got a hit."

Pong! The sound of contact between ball and bat rang out; Ami had wielded the bat correctly for the first time in her life. But the path of the ball and the sound it made were both extremely amateurish, flying straight up into the sky and landing a few centimeters in front of the batter.

"Mm...a soft catcher's hit. Alright, I'll let you pass! You can rest now!"

"What is he so arrogant about...?"

The finally liberated Ami crawled through the protective fencing and returned to the outside world, passing the bat to Taiga,

"Alright, you're the next sacrifice. Be careful, that guy's a real loudmouth and pervert. Ah... I never want to be associated with him in any way ever again..."

"Who's next!? I'll coach you myself, come!" Hearing the voice of the coach from hell, Taiga looked at Ryuuji hesitantly.

"Go on, make him a happy coach."

"Mm... You're right. Alright! Kitamura-kun! I'm next!"

Taiga took off her woolen sweater, tied up her hair, and went through the protective fence, stepping into the strike zone with gusto. It was probably Taiga's first time playing baseball too, but the impression she gave as she did a practice swing, pointing towards the pitching machine, her left hand rolled up the sleeve of her one piece dress was like that of Suzuki Ichiro himself. Just like this, Suzuki Taiga was born into the world.

"Alright! We'll start from 70 km/h! We're starting, Aisaka!"

"Mm!"

Ami sat down beside Ryuuji while sorting out her slightly-messy hair. At the same time, a crisp sound was heard, as Taiga's bat came into direct contact with the ball. The ball flew straight at the circular target, hitting the target near its centre. "Oh!" Ryuuji started clapping in spite of himself. "That's really good..." Ami was even more bored.

"I hit it? That's it? Isn't it a bit too easy? Kitamura-kun, it should be fine for you to increase the speed."

Taiga swayed from side to side in her billowing one piece western dress while shouting for a bigger challenge. Kitamura looked at her with shining eyes,

"Have I found an uncut diamond? Ah! Aisaka! Why didn't a genius like you join the softball club!?"

"Because I've already had enough of sports clubs in middle school. Is it alright to hold it like this?"

"Let me see... Yes, just like that! You actually held the bat so perfectly without any prior experience! I'm in awe of your amazing physical talent!"

"I'm not that great~ Minorin's much better than me~."

"Ehehehe." Taiga smiled shyly, her face turning a shade of deep red. *Just like this, it feels good! Kitamura looks happy too. He's happy, right?* Ryuuji observed him quietly so as to avoid misinterpreting his facial expression. But suddenly, on the back of his hand...

"Hey, Takasu-kun, I'm very bored. It's so cold here... What do you say to the two of us going somewhere else to get something warm to drink?"

Ami's pearly fingers traced the back of Ryuuji's hand, while her watery eyes looked up at his face, as she swiftly moved her body in close, attaching herself onto Ryuuji by hugging his arm tightly,

"What do you think...?"

Ami cocked her head to the side, her sakura-colored lips slightly pouting, her brown eyes staring straight at Ryuuji's face, almost pulling him into another world. Ryuuji's sense of reason disappeared in an instant.

"Alright, let's go."

"Huh, hey...?"

Ryuuji didn't push Ami away, nor did make any reaction that conveyed a feeling of dislike, but just stood up abruptly. Surprisingly, Ami was the one who made a surprised sound, who lifted her head to look at Ryuuji with a suspicious look in her eyes. Ryuuji signaled for her to stand up with him.

"What, aren't you the one who asked me to go with you? There's a juice vending machine at the counter, let's go."

"Why does this feel so different from the usual...? Just what are you scheming?"

"How rude, I'm not you, so obviously I'm not scheming to do anything."

"I'm never scheming...never mind."

Ami looked at Ryuuji, and stood up while saying,

"Since it's like this, then I have something I want to do too."

Ami hugged Ryuuji's arm tightly, as if she was hanging on him.

"Hey... Be careful of what you're doing!"

The light smell of flowery perfume floated into his nose.

"What's wrong? You're losing control already? Aren't you a bit too weak-minded?"

Due to their similar heights, Ami's face was almost pressing into Ryuuji's neck. Ryuuji was unable to escape Ami's joint-locking of his elbow and wrist, as the two of them leaned into each other like lovers.

"We're going for a break~!"

"Alright! Hey, Aisaka, the ball's coming at 100 km/h!"

"Huh! Right...!?"

The dedicated Kitamura didn't notice, but Taiga widened her eyes in shock at the two people who were intimately connected together. The end result was that Taiga swung her bat too late, missing the simple straight pitch.

"No, it's not what you think it is!" Ryuuji shook his head furiously, trying to convey his message to Taiga with his eyes. "I'm disappearing so that you can be alone together with Kitamura. Though Kitamura's more energetic when Ami's around, it seems as though he's falling to the dark side. So I'm going along with Ami's rashness as usual to give you this chance." But Ami, who was still attached to Ryuuji's arm, happily turned around and stuck her tongue out at Taiga.

"...!"

She didn't move at all! Taiga had two strikes, and was in a dangerous situation. The fire in Coach Kitamura's eyes flared even brighter.

"Hehehe, finally it's just-the-two-of-us... Just joking."

After walking into the office of both the golf course and the baseball practice centre, Ami immediately let go of Ryuuji's arm and pushed him away. Ryuuji wasn't particularly surprised, as it was Ami's normal reaction.

"I've already gotten an inkling of how you work. As long as Taiga's not around, there would be no fun in sticking to me, right? Alright, go and sit there, I'll buy a drink for you."

"I'll buy it myself... Ah, it's so~ boring."

Ami put on a bored expression on her beautiful face and cut in front of Ryuuji. Looking at Ami's dainty back, Ryuuji suddenly wanted to take revenge for always being tricked by her.

"What are you talking about? Be more honest if you can't bear to be separated from me."

"Ah!?"

Ryuuji acted as if he was going to hug her from behind. He was only acting, but Ami immediately ran away and turned around.

"You screamed! You screamed!"

Ryuuji pointed at the surprised Ami, who had jumped away, and laughed. It felt quite good to take revenge for always being tricked and laughed at! Ami's mouth was open, her face red with anger, probably because she had been pranked by someone like Ryuuji,

"I'm so...angry! Juice! You said that you'd buy me a drink!"

Ami stood with her legs apart and pointed to the old-fashioned paper cup vending machine. The price of 70 yen and its old-fashioned design was vintage to the extent of being humorous.

"Yes yes, what do you want?"

"Honeydew."

"...Would that be alright? Are models allowed to drink such sugary drinks?"

"Yes we can! Stop poking your nose into things that don't concern you! Seriously, you're always thinking of such unnecessary things...!"

After buying coffee for himself and the honeydew drink for Ami, the two of them sat on the bartop counter in the sparsely decorated eating section.

"Don't be so irritated."

"Didn't I tell you not to stick your nose into other people's business!? Don't talk to me! And don't look at me!"

Looks like Ami's really angry. Supporting her head with an arm on the counter, she turned her body away from Ryuuji. Ami drank her drink that was full of artificial components. Her back and shoulders gave off the light smell of perfume and an evil aura. Ryuuji's mood also became bad accordingly,

"Would it be okay if I apologize? I was only joking, just like how you always jokingly stick to me?"

"I'm not angry at that... Never mind."

"Then what are you angry about?"

"Never mind never mind... There are a lot of reasons which Takasu-kun wouldn't understand."

Ami, who was facing the wall, forcibly ended the short conversation. But...

"Many reasons... So you're frustrated by a combination of work-related problems, Kitamura's rashness, anger at my actions... Something like that?"

Ryuuji mentally prepared himself to be ignored, attempting to continue the conversation. But surprisingly, Ami answered softly while still staring at the wall,

"...No, not like that. It's not that simple."

Ryuuji seemed to have picked up on something. He felt that Ami's words had a deeper meaning, but was unable to find a way to get her to reveal the deeper meaning of her words. It seemed to be just as Ami had said, it wasn't that simple.

"Kawashima, you're such a complicated woman. It'll certainly take a lot of effort to truly understand everything about you."

"If a person isn't willing to make that kind of effort to understand me, then he has no right to become my other half. And...I'm worth the effort, right?"

Speaking with an arrogant attitude, Ami flicked her hair rather violently, finally turning to look at Ryuuji with her usual ice-cold look. *At least it's better than staring at the wall.* Ryuuji was slightly relieved,

"Ah, you're not the only one who's hard to understand. Kitamura said that he dyed his hair because he didn't want to be the student council president. That no one would expect anything of him if he became a delinquent... What do you think? Is he speaking the truth?"

"Huh~?" Ami's pearly-white features finally turned to face Ryuuji,

"That's-why-I-said, regardless of whether it's true or not, Yuusaku is hoping that 'someone' would... Never mind, I said that I wouldn't get involved in this, so you don't have to report such things to me. I feel stupid just being together with Yuusaku."

At this time, an alarm suddenly sounded in the practice centre on the other side.

"What!?"

"Wha, What's going on!?"

Is it a disaster simulation? Or could it be a real fire? Ryuuji and Ami stood up together, but the workers at the counter looked to be relaxed, as if nothing was wrong. A middle-aged woman wearing thick makeup was dragging something enormous behind her.

"Congratulations!!!"

"Congratulations for hitting it!!!"

"Who's the one who hit it?"

In the midst of the applause of the workers...

"She's the one! She good isn't she!? And she's only a beginner!"

The extremely happy coach grinned widely, pointing at the uncut diamond, Taiga. She wore a confused look on her face, but laughed along with him, standing among the applause of everyone present while hugging the gigantic stuffed animal which the middle-aged woman had forced into her arms. The stuffed animal wore a sash around its neck which said "Congratulations for hitting a home run!" Ryuuji walked to Taiga, trying to find out what had happened,

"What have you done again!?"

"Nothing... It seems like I hit something. I swung my bat and the ball flew to the centre of the target, then the alarm sounded, and it's become like this..."

"What do you mean by become like this? Isn't this great!? Aisaka's really talented! You're the exact opposite of Ami! A home run, that's great!"

"To be honest, I don't really need that kind of talent."

Ami glared at the excited Kitamura, finishing the rest of her drink. Taiga passed the stuffed animal to Kitamura, "...Do you want it?" Kitamura happily accepted.

Ryuuji asked the middle-aged woman with thick make-up,

"Is a home run a rare occurance?"

"Not really. It happens once or twice in a month."

"I see..."

"Your eyes look like an animal's. Hey, everyone, look, this boy's eyes look like an animal's!"

"Ah, it's true."

"Ahhhh..."

"Let me see, who?"

"Animal? Snake! It's like a snake's eyes!" *It'll be worth it as long as Kitamura's happy.* Ryuuji endured the mass of middle-aged women surrounding him.

The sun finally set in the east, and the wind became colder accordingly.

It was about time to go home. Just as the three people who were going back to the Takasu residence were waving goodbye to Ami---

"Ah~ What a coincidence~!"

"Yes, what a coincidence."

A makeup-less Yasuko walked up to them. After a refreshing sleep, her skin cells were restored to their youthful beauty. Yasuko, who had gone shopping, was carrying a bag from the makeup shop in each hand, wearing clothes that were slightly better than Ryuuji's gym clothes. After seeing Ami, Yasuko said,

"Ah, Ryu-chan's friends have increased by one person~! I remember seeing you before~? It's been a long time~! Ah~ luckily I bought four puddings! Come and eat with everyone~. Ya-chan's an adult now, so she can go without eating the pudding~!"

"Ah, it's been a long time! But I'm about to go home now, goodbye everyone~"

Ami put on her nice demeanor, attempting to avoid the invitation and go home. But...

"Ryu-chan! Stop her! Ya-chan needs helpers!"

"Huh? For what?"

"Just stop her right now~!"

The rarely-excited Yasuko whispered her instructions to Ryuuji, so how could the son with a mother-complex not obey? He quickly caught up with

Ami. "Huh? Why do I have to go to your house?" Ryuuji glossed over her question with an "Alright, alright, just come and have some pudding", succeeding in bringing Ami back home with the others. But even Ryuuji didn't know the real reason for bringing Ami back with them.

And then...

"Huff huff huff huff..."

After finishing the pudding that Yasuko bought, everyone finally understood the meaning behind Yasuko's actions. Ryuuji, Taiga, Ami and Kitamura all widened their eyes in surprise, looking up at Yasuko.

Her track pants were rolled all the way up to her knees, an old apron draped over her T-shirt, both hands wearing rubber gloves for some unknown reason. In her hands was...

"Ryu-chan! Now! Keep Kitamura on the floor~!"

"Oh... Oh!"

...a black package that read "Takes care of any color! Will transform your hair into the darkest shade of black! The strongest black hair reverser FOR MEN!". At the same time that Ryuuji came to fully comprehend the situation, Kitamura had also become aware of the danger, jumping up like a stallion.

"Taiga! Subdue him!"

"Huh!? Oh, Oh!"

"Kawashima! Flank him to block his path to the doorway!"

"Ah~ so that's what it's all about~? Alright, alright..."

Ryuuji grabbed both of Kitamura's arms from behind, while Taiga held on to his legs from the front, restricting his movement, almost lifting him off the ground.

"Wait, this kind of position, wait, wait, wait, wait... Ahhhhhhhh...!"

"What are you so excited about, you idiot!? Keep him in place!"

Of course, Kitamura was also shouting at the same time,

"You trai~tor~! Takasu, you lied to me! Yasuko-san, weren't you on my side!?"

"Yes~ I'm sorry~. Of course, Ya-chan wishes for Kitamura to be Ryu-chan's friend forever~ but I just got off the phone with your father and he's very angry, so Ya-chan hopes that you'll be back to normal before going back home~."

"Damn, you even kept in contact with my parents... No matter how young you look, you're still a parent!"

"Ryu-chan, hold him down properly~. Ami-chan, come and help me~."

Yasuko passed the box to Ami, squeezing the dye onto a brush, then holding Kitamura's face tightly in place. Ami also pulled on Kitamura's ears, helping to hold his head in place,

"Ah... Such a short-lived blond-hair era. Yuusaku, just give in to your fate."

"I don't want ittttttttttttttttttttttttttt~~!"

The stubborn Kitamura shook his head vigorously, causing Yasuko and Ami to let go of his head, screaming in agony,

"Ah~!"

"Argh!!!!!!"

Kitamura knocked the tools for dyeing out of their hands, and the dye landed on Yasuko and Ami.

"Ahhhhh! This is bad! Quick, go shower! Wash it off! If you don't wash it off, your body will be dyed black~!"

"Ahhh~ It's gone in~! My eyes hurt~!"

"It hurts! It's gone into my eyes! It smells! It'll be bad if we don't wash it off quickly!"

The scene at hand was hell, but Ryuuji was also wailing in sorrow. The tatami, the floor, the ceiling, the walls... More importantly, on the body! He let go of Kitamura, using his fingers to wipe away the dye that been sprayed onto the faces of the two wailing ladies, sending them to the bathroom after they were able to open their eyes. Sounds of the two of them taking off their clothes were heard, followed by the sound of rushing water.

"That's why I said to just let me be...!"

Ryuuji was extremely angry at that.

"What did you say!?"

Hearing Kitamura's words, Ryuuji had already forgotten about washing his hands, turning around with an extremely scary expression, looking as though he was about to say "What did you just say? You arrogant blond-haired delinquent!", and he did want to say that.

My tatami mat... No, what kind of attitude is that? Yasuko did that because Kitamura came to my house. This bastard, he actually dares to say something like that after causing so much trouble for everyone?

"You bastard, what are you trying to do? You ran away from home to my home and still want us to leave you alone!? What kind of attitude is that when it's so obvious that everyone's so worried about you!? Go back to where you belong so that your angry father can whip some sense into you!"

"I-I'll go home even without you saying it! Takasu is a traitor! And to think I trusted you!"

"That's none of my business! A bastard like you who doesn't even know how much everyone is worrying about you has no association with me whatsoever!"

"Oh, so it's like this!"

"Yes, that's right!"

Kitamura stumbled into the doorway, and came back to take the momentarily forgotten "home run souvenir" stuffed animal, violently slamming the door as he went out of the apartment.

"Idiot idiot idiot!!! I don't care about that guy anymore!"

Ryuuji screamed at the closed door.

"...!"

Taiga fell at Ryuuji's feet, one hand stretched out to the retreating figure, looking for the disappearing illusion, but only able to shake her finger in an extremely pitiful manner.

* * *

"That's what I've been saying since the beginning, right? You'd be stupid to treat that guy seriously. Ah, it's delicious~. It was the right choice to order this after all!"

"You can order dessert too~. I'm really sorry, Ami-chan... It's all Ya-chan's fault for dragging you into this... Do your eyes still hurt? I'm really sorry for dirtying your clothes..."

"It's alright~! It was good that I showered immediately, so my face, body and hair weren't affected. My clothes were black in the first place, so it'll be alright once I get rid of the smell."

"Remember to ask for the cleaning expenses from Ya-chan~."

"It's alright~. It's enough to treat me to this meal! I'm really lucky today to have people treating me to various things!"

Ami smiled while in her nice-girl mode. Her hair had already been blown dry, and she was wearing what Taiga was wearing as pajamas last night - a hooded T-shirt and track pants. Her original clothes were now in a wash bag. Taiga, who was sitting beside her, was also eating spaghetti with her fork.

After Ami and Yasuko's hair was dry, the four of them went to the Italian restaraunt in front of the train station to eat dinner. Yasuko insisted on paying for the meal to make up for bothering Ami.

"Kawashima, is it really alright to eat here?"

"Yes, why do you ask? The food is very nice here, I like it."

"I don't mean it in that way... Didn't you eat spagetti for lunch too...?"

"Yes~. Don't the Italians eat spagetti for breakfast, lunch and dinner? Ah, Takasu-kun, did you just think that I'm a 'natural airhead'~? That's mean, don't misunderstand me! People always say that about me! Aisaka-san, don't misunderstand me too!"

"Hehe..." The long-awaited nice demeanor of Ami-chan finally appeared while looking at Taiga, who was beside her, beaming a smile. Taiga didn't say anything, totally ignoring the fronting Ami, and continuing to toy with her spaghetti. Yasuko said to Taiga,

"Taiga-chan... It's all Ya-chan's fault for making Kitamura angry... I'm sorry..."

Taiga immediately raised her head,

"Ugu...no, I'm not angry at Ya-chan! I helped to hold Kitamura-kun down too. He must be angry at me..."

Taiga shook her head, but her voice lacked its characteristic force of will. Perhaps she was sad at the thought of Kitamura being angry at her? She

sat quietly beside Ami, seemingly lacking the strength to even bring the spaghetti up to her mouth. But if it was up to Ryuuji, he would say that Taiga had no reason to be down over Kitamura, and that they should just leave him be. That was the only thing they could do at this time. Just how normal can the guy who appeared so pitifully and in need of sympathy and still shout "leave me alone!" be?

"What's so bad about that? We've already proven that Kitamura is just like what Kawashima said he was."

"Ahh..." Yasuko peeked at her son, who was shoveling large amounts of spaghetti into his mouth,

"Ryu-chan, you shouldn't be angry at Kitamura~. You shouldn't be saying things like that when you're obviously so worried about him~. Do you hear me? We should also be happy that a cute guest like Ami is eating with us tonight~! Alright alright, smile~?"

"Yasuko-san! Takasu-kun won't be happy just because I'm here!"

"Huh~? Is that so? That's strange, but Ami-chan's so cute~."

"Because Takasu-kun already has 'that'!"

Cough! The timing for the chili to stick onto Ryuuji's throat was just right. What is she talking about!? He really wanted to make sure, but he was coughing nonstop. Yasuko cocked her head to the side in confusion,

"That?"

Cough cough! Taiga was the next one to choke. She was shocked because Yasuko's hand suddenly pointed towards her, and conveyed an expression of extreme distaste, their actions perfect mirror images of each other. *What exactly is Ami thinking about?* She continued to speak with an angelic smile on her face,

"Wrong, not that, someone else~!"

"Huh~! It's not Taiga-chan!? Sob~! Ya-chan has been constantly hoping that Taiga-chan will become Ryu-chan's bride and become a part of our family~!"

"Wh-What are you talking about... Cough cough! Kawashima! What kind of nonsense are you spouting!?"

"Ah~ Takasu-kun doesn't want his parent to know about something like this? No matter how you hide it, your family members will still know that the other person isn't Aisaka-san when you get to the next level with her. But it's alright, Yasuko-san! If you want Taiga to be part of your family, you could just adopt her, since the concept of kinship doesn't exist in the Aisaka family."

"Ah, so there's that way too~! But Ya-chan doesn't know what kind of person Taiga-chan's mother is..."

"The two of you are too noisy! Control yourself! You've been talking nonsense since just now!"

Ryuuji couldn't take it anymore and cut short their conversation. The conversation of the two people who had no idea of Taiga's situation was getting closer to the hole in Taiga's heart.

"Ryuuji, you're the noisiest person here."

But Taiga's expression didn't change at all, as she merely flicked her hair,

"I don't wish for Ryuuji or anyone to intervene in my life. I don't mind continuing like this since I can live by myself. I can get money when I need it, I know how to wash dishes, and I even know how to fry eggs, I don't have any problems living by myself, and I'm not afraid of the future at all!"

Know how to fry...eggs...? Ryuuji suddenly had the impulse to rebut her proclamation, but...

"Ah! Lonely woman! That's so sad!"

"Whatever makes you happy, since I don't really care about what the stupid chihuahua thinks."

Taiga showed no response to Ami's provocation, as she continued to eat her spaghetti. Ryuuji suddenly thought of a question. *She's only saying that about living alone in response to Ami's provocation right? What you really want is to be together with Kitamura right?* But Taiga's face showed no signs of hesitation after saying "living by myself", as though she really felt that way. For the very first time, Ryuuji felt a fleeting suspicion.

The Taiga that his eyes saw and the real Taiga - were they completely different? On the topic of "unable to understand each other", Ryuuji and Taiga were the same. Maybe the distance between the two of them wasn't as close as they had thought? That what they saw was merely an imperfect reflection of the truth?

Ryuuji heard Ami mutter in an irritating voice,

"Humph~. Do you seriously think that you'd be alright living by yourself? I had originally thought that you would be the one who'd be most unable to forgive Yuusaku's actions, the one who'd be the angriest at his actions..."

In the end, Ami stayed with the group for almost the entire day. After sending her back home, the Takasu family and Taiga went home together, with Yasuko leading the line that the three of them had formed.

"Ryuuji."

Taiga spoke while pacing with Ryuuji's footsteps,

"Stupid chihuahua was hinting about Minorin, right? That got me thinking... Minorin loves frightening things, and once announced that she 'hated frightening things'?"

"Yeah, I remember that."

"Didn't Kitamura also say that he didn't want to be student council president? Might that be hinting that he 'really wants to be student council president'?"

Ryuuji wanted to say that "I don't want to be involved with Kitamura anymore", but kept quiet.

Kitamura did mention that. And before saying that, something seemed to have happened between him and the student council president... and he won't tell me the truth no matter how much I ask him. Although Ryuuji was tired of caring about that guy, he was also worried about what had happened to him.

"Maybe there's a chance..."

"Since it has come to this, there are no other possibilities, so now..."

"We must make him the student council president."

Ryuuji had suddenly thought of a scary idea.

It was Sunday tomorrow, so there should be enough preparation time.

Chapter 5

"Gah...!?"

"What's happening so early in the morning!?"

"It's so scary...!"

It was 8 o'clock on Monday morning, at the beginning of school hours.

On the first morning after the weekend, greetings were normally either a cheerful "Morning!" or sleepy "Hey".

But on this particular morning, the voices at the school gate were slightly different than usual, for the cheerful greetings were replaced by fear and apprehension. The students who had just reached school were still unaware of what had happened as they squeezed into the crowd that had gathered at the gates, immediately forming a new layer of the human wall as they stood there breathlessly, and ended up totally clogging up the extremely narrow hallway near the shoe lockers. The students who had stopped walking in response to the initial commotion were now caught in an extremely chaotic situation from which they were unable to escape.

The human wall had formed around an air pocket about 5 meters in diameter, looking like a puddle of vomit on a crowded train. But there was no crowded train, nor were there any puddles of vomit to avoid.

"Are you sure about this?"

"No, no problem."

"Don't force yourself; I wanted to do it myself."

"No... I want to do it. This is my choice, so I'll do it. I've already promised to do anything for Kitamura-kun."

Ryuuji and Taiga stood in the middle of the crowd, whispering to each other in voices that only the other could hear.

The two of them stood side by side on a platform that was taken from the gym storage room. Taiga, who had opened her eyes extremely wide, was staring at the microphone in her hands, as Ryuuji tied the sash on her shoulder after confirming Taiga's determination. In the next second...

"It can't beeeeeeeeeeee!?"

"Noooooooooooooooooo!!!"

Even before Taiga's speech, the first layer of the human wall around the two of them had already started wailing in despair. "Someone stop them!" "It's impossible to stop them!" "Have mercy on us!" The wails came from the students of 2-C who had strategically placed themselves in the crowd. *Alright.* Ryuuji signaled with his eyes to Taiga. Taiga nodded before taking a deep breath.

"Be quiet!"

She shouted into the microphone, but her voice was not amplified by the microphone.

"Hmm? I forgot to turn on the power..."

Everyone around her, including Ryuuji fell to the ground, breaking the tense atmosphere. Taiga's face reddened, but she immediately steadied herself,

"Th, This isn't a microphone! It's a weapon to use against people who I don't like!"

Crack! Taiga suddenly swung the microphone at the guy standing in front of her, landing a sharp blow onto his head. The guy in question slumped to the ground, unconscious. "Hey, Haruta! Don't die! Palmtop Tiger, what are you trying to do!?", Noto shouted at her in an overly-loud voice. In truth, Taiga had actually lessened the force of the blow with the back of her hand. Haruta calculated the exact timing of the hit and had successfully pretended to faint, falling to the ground with the whites of his

eyes showing and his body completely limp. In response to such an exciting performance, Ryuuji gratefully gave them a thumbs-up, and Haruta and Noto returned the gesture discretely.

"Some, someone call the teachers!"

"Someone's started fighting!"

The noise became louder and louder, gathering even more curious students. There were also random people who were taking photos with their cellphones in the crowd. Ryuuji licked his lips in appreciation of the huge crowd that had gathered, and the help of his comrades in 2-C. His terrifying gaze seemed to allude to his inner thoughts, *Yes, just like this, be even more fearful, you pitiful sacrifices...* Actually, he was indeed thinking about something like that; he wanted all the students in school to feel afraid and horrified.

"Shut up! Let me teach you what it's like to feel real fear!"

Taiga's voice was amplified in the small hallway by virtue of the microphone, which had finally been turned on. The students around the two of them could only stare with their mouths open.


生徒会副会長

"I hate all of you..."

Taiga scanned the crowd, remembering each of their faces. Her long hair hung in messy strands, her eyes glinting with an unnatural light. The sash on her shoulder read "Student Council President Election Candidate".

"With regards to those of you who've been making up rumours to humiliate me... With regards to those of you that have been spreading rumours about who I've been romantically involved with, I've been thinking of how to take revenge... And now I've finally thought of a way to have my revenge!"

Crack! Baring her teeth, Taiga raised her left hand, signaling in mid-air that she wanted to crush the students of the school in her hands,

"I, Aisaka Taiga will become the student council president, thus shrouding your high school lives in complete darkness, burying all of you and your blood-stained memories into the MO-MORG-MORGUE!"

"AH!!!" The students of 2-C started wailing again. Ryuuji wrinkled his eyebrows and stepped forward, giving the coup de grâce to the already devastated crowd,

"I will be the vice president... And it's all because you spread rumours about me... Saying that I'm pitiful, that I'm an abandoned male, that I'm a poor dog... I'll never forgive any of you!"

Without a microphone, Ryuuji was unable to project his voice across to the crowd, but his low voice, coupled with his extremely terrifying eyes achieved his intended effect.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Who said that Takasu wasn't a scary guy...!?"

"He's so scary!"

"We, We'll be murdered...!"

"Those eyes, he's not a normal human!"

"Fu!" The sound of Taiga giggling softly added another layer of murderous intent to Ryuuji's eyes. The students who were looking up at the two of them started to scream for real. The Palmtop Tiger was forming an alliance with the delinquent Takasu to bring a curse onto the students by running for student council president. This fact struck fear into the hearts of the students.

Although the two of them were apologetic about their actions and didn't really want to scare their fellow students, just for a day, Ryuuji didn't intend to be kind. He shot a curse at the girl who was screaming "My high school life!". Although it wasn't intentional, Ryuuji and Taiga still felt as though they were criminals.

Yes, the method that they had chosen was to go over to the dark side. Their goal was to...

"Ah, that blond-haired guy's the student council vice-president, Kitamura-kun!"

"He seems to have said that he wouldn't run for student council president, and also wants to leave the student council!"

"Is that why the Palmtop Tiger came out to take over the school!?"

Among the students of 2-C, only Kitamura didn't receive the secret text message that had informed the entire class of the plan. Kitamura, who had come to school with his golden mane prominently displayed, saw Ryuuji and Taiga standing on the raised platform. His expression hardened for a second, but he almost immediately saw through their plan and walked away. A few students chased after him,

"Wait! Kitamura! Didn't you see what they are trying to do!?"

"Please run for the elections! I'm begging you!"

"If this goes on, my high school life will be destroyed by the two of them!"

That's right, carry on. Ryuuji and Taiga discretely exchanged looks, confirming the success of their plan. This plan was named the "Lure Kitamura out to run for the elections by going to the dark side" tactic. The more hated they were by the student population, the more pressure would be on Kitamura to run for the student council president elections, which was what the two of them hoped to achieve with this plan. They wanted to spread the notion that only Kitamura could defeat Taiga and Ryuuji in the elections throughout the school, so as to force Kitamura to run for the election. Since everyone knew that Minori and Taiga were best friends, Minori had already slipped away to class. She was the only one who wasn't able to act as though she was afraid of Taiga.

There was another extremely important point here.

"Ah! It's so scary! What will happen in the end!?"

That's good, the timing is just right. Ryuuji lightly nodded. It came from Ami, the important person in the plan. She stepped onto the stage with Maya and Nanako flanking her. It was Maya who persuaded a reluctant Ami to participate in the plan.

"Ah, Kawashima-san! It's dangerous here! Come and hide behind me!"

"No, hide behind me!"

"No, I'll escort Ami back to the classroom!"

Male students surrounded Ami on all sides, with some people who weren't even part of the plan trying to explain the situation to the three of them. Maya and Nanako gave an extremely natural reaction, shouting, "Huh!? That's terrible!"

"It'll be bad if the Palmtop Tiger were to become the student council president!"

"Why doesn't Ami run for student council president? Ami's very popular!"

The short skit by the two of them gave the crowd a new perspective. "She's right." "If Kitamura doesn't want to run for student council president, then we might as well let Ami run..." "Kawashima-san should be able to achieve a landslide victory!" Ami turned towards Maya and Nanako,

"Me? You're right, our high school life will be destroyed by the Palmtop Tiger if this carries on! Even though I'm not qualified to be the student council president, I'm willing to run for the sake of everyone!"

Crack! This time, the microphone showed no mercy. Taiga had held the wire connected to the microphone and thrown it at Ami's forehead. Ami immediately dropped to the ground while clutching her head in her hands. "Ah! Ami! Ami, hang in there!" The students who were part of the plan and those who were not were united on common ground, making the disturbance even greater.

"Wahahahahaha! I'll secretly kill anyone who tries to interfere with my plan, even if you're a stupid chihuahua!"

What kind of secret killing are you talking about, you just threw a microphone at her head in broad daylight. But Taiga's swinging microphone had already clearly expressed her intention.

"How can we let Ami be in danger!?"

"Damn! No one would run for student council elections if it's so dangerous!"

"It's all Kitamura's fault for being so indecisive! Only Kitamura is qualified to become the student council president!"

"This is Kitamura's responsibility!"

The students who were part of the plan pushed the responsibility onto Kitamura, totally eliminating the possibility of anyone else running for student council president. As expected, everyone turned to support Kitamura for student council president. *I actually thought of such a brilliant strategy...* Behind Ryuuji, who was shaking with his self-congratulation,

"Hmm..."

Bonk! The sound sounded heavier than usual. The single class teacher (30), who had snuck to stand behind Taiga, had been hit by her flying microphone...

"Aisaka-san, Takasu-kun, it looks like the two of you have calmed down a little now..."

Bullseye.

"Hmm... So that's what it was about. Takasu-kun had originally wanted to run by himself?"

"Yes..."

Ryuuji and Taiga had been dragged to the lecture room, and had outlined their plan to the single woman and the disciplinary teacher.

"In short, we're acting as the hated candidates so as to make everyone feel that 'only Kitamura can stop the school from ruin'. I think that Kitamura would be forced to run for the election...but..."

"It wouldn't seem as dangerous if only Ryuuji ran for the election...so I decided to run for the elections too..."

The single woman rubbed her tired eyes, speaking with an extremely fatigued voice,

"So you're trying to say that Kitamura will recover once he becomes student council president? You're saying that you don't want him to continue being rebellious?"

Ryuuji nodded his head solemnly,

"That's right... We're not the only ones with such thoughts too, as we've informed the whole of 2-C about the plan, and they've agreed to help us. Kitamura's sudden rebelliousness is connected to the student council, and

I feel that in the process of making him return to the student council, we'll be able to find out the reason behind this. We'll be able to solve this problem once we know the reason behind his actions."

"But what if Kitamura-kun still refuses to run for student council president? When there's only one candidate, voting would be a mere formality, so Aisaka-san will surely become the student council president."

"...Kitamura-kun will not just sit and watch."

Ryuuji also nodded in agreement to Taiga's assertion. It was because everyone in 2-C believed that Kitamura will surely intervene that the two of them had been willing to go over to the dark side to search for the way to save Kitamura.

"But I feel that he might be refusing to run precisely because everyone is asking him to run?"

"Even then, we still believe that he'll run in the end."

Hearing Taiga's determined words, the single woman exchanged a look with the disciplinary teacher.

"I understand. Since all of you think this way, then just do your best. But Aisaka-san, if you really become student council president, we will not accept reasons such as 'I only ran for fun'."

"I'm already mentally prepared. If I become student council president, I'll make good on my promise to turn this school into hell."

"...Of course I shall do my best to help Taiga if she really becomes student council president so as to avoid troubling our fellow students."

Ryuuji drowned out Taiga's sentence with his voice, and looked towards the sighing single woman.

"Mm, the two of you have to return safely. Right, and you will need posters and leaflets... Come to the teachers' office later. I'll teach the two of you to use the photocopy machine, so be ready with your terrifying political

manifesto. Do you know how to use the computer? I'll help you with that too."

Just like this, the single woman (30) had also gone over to the dark side, becoming one of the people who were trying to summon Kitamura back into the world.

On the same day, two hundred of the orange and black versions of the posters had been pasted in every corner of the school. The leaflets containing the caption "demonic contract" had also been given to every class, pushing the entire school into a fearful atmosphere of "Is this for real...?" The leaflets were also passed to the class of 2-C, with its students pretending not to know about the plan. "It can't be!" "Please think about it, Takasu!"

Only Kitamura remained silent.

The time given for campaigning was five days in total, until Friday. It was the deadline for the applications for all election candidates, while the extended homeroom time during the twice a month school day on Saturday the next day would be used for the voting.

* * *

"Sigh... He's such a stubborn fellow..."

"He hasn't spoken to me at all after that..."

"He's been ignoring me too... More accurately, he's been ignoring everyone in class..."

Ryuuji and Taiga didn't even have the television on as the two of them engaged in an empty conversation while looking at the ceiling.

The side dishes for dinner consisted of canned sashimi. Yasuko had gone to work early. The two people still in the house were left thinking "Time really flies."

It had already been five days since the two had called their classmates to put their plan in motion. On Monday, they announced that they had gone over to the dark side. On Tuesday, they ambushed students who were going home at the school gates and shook hands with every single one of them. On Wednesday, they announced their school reformation plan over the public announcement system during the lunch break, causing severe mental trauma and giddiness in several first-year girls. On Thursday, they patrolled the school after lessons, creating widespread despair and were subsequently scolded by a teacher, "You're too much!"

After four days, they realized that they didn't need to do any of this, for just the name "Palmtop Tiger" was enough to scare the students into submission. But suddenly...

"There's only one day left... If Kitamura still doesn't hand in his application form before the end of tomorrow..."

"I'll become the student council president..."

The two of them clammed up at the same time, and silence descended upon the Takasu residence.

Kitamura continued to go to school with his blond hair. Every time the teachers requested for him to dye it back, he always retorted, "This has already harmed my scalp, I can't dye it back anymore!" He also ignored Ryuuji and the rest of his classmates. He refused to listen to the other first, second and third year students who begged him everyday, "Please, run for student council president!", rejecting them firmly. "You can see that I'm not qualified to be the student council president from the colour of my hair."

Everything wasn't as simple as it seemed. Ryuuji had only just realized that Kitamura wasn't merely a model student. He was stubborn, spoiled,

vengeful, cold, and gloomy. Ryuuji placed his chin on his kneecap. Ever since the day he saw that Kitamura had cried, he had been thinking about the same thing.

What exactly do I know about Kitamura?

I understood him, and was content because I thought I understood him.

I understand you, that's why I want to help you. The repercussions of such immature contentment now reared its ugly head. Ryuuji felt that he hadn't matured at all, that all he had done was to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. Ryuuji sneaked a peek at the side of Taiga's face. He had thought that he understood Taiga, that everything that had to do with Taiga involved him as well. Helping her, intervening in her affairs, taking care of her - all these actions were merely for his own satisfaction.

Therefore he had tried to use the same method to influence Taiga regarding her father, and he had failed miserably. He had almost lost Taiga, giving her another painful memory, and leaving himself with a pitiful ending. Even though he had sworn to never do such a stupid thing ever again, even though he had already paid such a high price for that lesson, he had done it again, almost losing his best friend Kitamura this time. When had he done such a stupid thing? Was he wrong from the beginning?

Although he hadn't noticed Kitamura's abnormal behaviour, Ryuuji had still asserted single-mindedly that there must be some controlling variable, and had acted to help him to recover. Had he already done the wrong thing at that point in time? But, should he have used his own immaturity and his lack of understanding as an excuse to leave Kitamura to his own devices? Was it just as Ami had said, that Kitamura knew that someone would come and help him the moment he cried? Should he have done what Minori had suggested, to just wait for Ami, the "last hope" to appear and help Kitamura?

I really can't just sit by and do nothing... No, I can't do it because of my desire for that self-satisfaction in doing something kind and worthy of praise. But...

"I don't know... I don't know what to do..."

Ryuuji closed his eyes and sighed.

"Ryuuji... Your cellphone's ringing."

Taiga slid the vibrating cellphone over to Ryuuji's feet. Ryuuji hesitated for a moment upon seeing an unfamiliar number, but he still accepted the call.

What's talking to a stranger if it'll get him out of this dead end?

"Hello?"

"Hello? Ah, I'm Murase from class 2-A. Is this Takasu?"

"Yes, that's me. Murase...?"

He had no impression of that name since he wasn't one of Ryuuji's classmates in year one. Taiga also slanted her head in confusion, looking at Ryuuji.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you, but I have to talk to you about Kitamura... Ah, I'm the head administrator for the student council, so I've been working alongside Kitamura in the student council since last year."

"You're from the student council...?"

Ryuuji turned up the volume of the phone, his heartbeat increasing at the sound of Murase's voice.

"Yes. You're supporting the Palmtop Tiger in her bid to run for student council president, and we know that it's to force Kitamura to run, right?"

"Yes... We've been found out..."

"Yes. And I think that there are few students who really fear you, especially among the second years, since most people know that you aren't a delinquent, and that you're Kitamura's best friend... Anyway, I wanted to tell you not to worry about the student council president election, for I'll run for president if Kitamura does not hand in his application tomorrow. Then you'll be able to pull out without any worries."

"Alright... Thank you for informing me. I'm actually rather worried about what to do if Taiga really became the student council president."

"It'll be alright, just leave it to me. I'm planning to wait for Kitamura's application until the last moment. On the surface, it'll be best if the vice-president succeeds the president, and honestly, it's hard to imagine the student council without Kitamura after two years of working together. It'll be extremely boring without him."

"You're right, I can understand your feelings."

"Though the president says 'Don't worry about that bastard! Let him go!', she obviously does not want everything to end like this before she leaves for good."

Just as he was preparing to answer "I understand that too.", Ryuuji asked a question,

"Leave for good?"

"Oh, right, you don't know about it. Though it's not much of a secret... Right, anyway, there were a lot of reasons..."

"What do you mean? Tell me about it."

"Umm... Ah..."

Murase obviously had realized that he had said something that he shouldn't have said. That he hesitated even though he said that it wasn't a secret seemed to hint that the reason for Kitamura's actions really did

come from the student council. Ryuuji believed that if Murase didn't tell him now, then he and Taiga would have run for the elections for nothing.

"Please tell me, we're also very worried about Kitamura, since we don't know what happened... We can only ask for help from you people at the student council! If you have a clue, even just a little thing, even if it's just conjecture or a theory, please tell me about it. I'm begging you!"

Even though the person on the other side of the line couldn't see it, Ryuuji still bowed furiously to his cellphone. The hesitant Murase was finally persuaded by Ryuuji,

"This happened shortly before Kitamura said that he wanted to quit the student council... The cultural festival was just a while ago wasn't it? The student council was cleaning up together with the festival committee the next day, and then..."

Ryuuji listened to Murase talk without responding, pressing his cellphone into his ear.

After Murase had finished speaking, Ryuuji said, "...Thank you for telling me."

Ryuuji flipped his cellphone shut after the conversation and stood up.

"Ryuuji? Who called? You were talking about Kitamura-kun, right?"

Ryuuji didn't answer Taiga's question, walking purposefully to the doorway wearing only a long-sleeved T-shirt and track pants. "Ryuuji!? What's wrong!?"

Taiga chased after him, but Ryuuji didn't turn around, because he couldn't turn back.

His mind was blank.

Chaotic, and what else could be used to describe it? Anger? An anger that even he didn't understand rose up from his stomach. The burning emotions destroyed Ryuuji's sense of reason.

"I'm calling you! Where are you going!?"

"I'm going to...beat Kitamura up!"

"Huh!? Wait... Ryuuji!"

Without wearing his jacket, Ryuuji rushed out of the apartment after putting on his sports shoes, leaving Taiga behind. He didn't even lock the door before running down the stairs.

The sky was already dark with a bitter cold, freezing every breath in the throat, but Ryuuji still continued to run. The hardness of the asphalt road resisted the pressure exerted by his feet, sending shockwaves up his body, the pain snaking up his back. The footsteps that refused to stop increased in speed as Ryuuji reached the larger road, his destination being the Kitamura residence on the other side of the bridge. Even if he was ignored and hated, Ryuuji still wanted to drag Kitamura out for a full explanation. *I don't care if I'm immature, or that I'm doing something stupid, I don't care about any of that.* He had seriously worried and thought about Kitamura's actions. Not just himself, Minori, Ami, Yasuko, Noto, Haruta, everyone in his class, the student council members, Kitamura's family, the single woman, and Taiga. Taiga had even cried for Kitamura's sake.

All this for that kind of thing.

For something that could not be changed.

He's just a kid throwing a tantrum!

"Th-Th-Th-That...BASTARD...!"

Ryuuji swore through the gaps of his teeth. He ran up the concrete stairs, through the grass, and reached the pathway beside the river that still gave off an unsavoury smell even in winter. All Ryuuji wanted to do was to drag Kitamura out by the collar of his shirt as quickly as possible, putting his face in front of him to get a good look at that face. He wanted to take a

good look at the face that was able to cause such a huge mess for "that kind of thing".

Running towards the bridge, the face of that blond-haired boy appeared in Ryuuji's head. At that moment, a figure suddenly emerged from the grass.

"Huh!?"

"Ah!!!"

Amid shouts of pain, the two people who had bumped their heads together fell to the ground.

The two of them groaned in pain while opening their eyes to confirm the identity of the other, and froze.

Under the street lights, the two people who were sitting on the ground were in the exact same position as the other, pointing wordlessly at the other. No, Ryuuji was the more surprised of the two. His lips were trembling uncontrollably as he looked at the face that was slightly different from the one in his memory.

"Ki...Kitamura!? What's with your face!?"

"Takasu..."

Ryuuji helped the person he had intended to hit up, taking a tissue from his pocket.

"Ah, thank you..."

"Who did this!? Are you alright!"

"No, it was my dad..."

Kitamura, who had suddenly appeared, had blood dripping from his nose and chin. On closer inspection, there was blood coming out from his mouth as well, while his cheeks were saturated with tears that could not be concealed by his swollen eye.

"Can you stand up? Come, I'll help you up!"

"Gah..."

Ryuuji unhesitatingly offered his hand, which Kitamura took while fresh tears flowed from his eyes. Ryuuji rubbed his back comfortingly.

The reason behind the tears might have been what Murase had said. Student council president Kano Sumire was planning to go overseas to study after graduating from high school, but the timing had suddenly changed and she had to go to America the week before graduating. This was the reason for Kitamura's actions.

* * *

The raging nimbus - it sounded really nice to use that phrase as a description, though it was merely a rather wide first-level river that flowed past grey streets.

At the end of the walking path beside the river, where there was no sign of life except for the occasional truck or taxi, the two of them stretched out their legs through the railing and sat down, watching the dark and murky river.

Ryuuji breathed in awkwardly, and snuck a peek at the side of Kitamura's face. He had been beaten up rather badly, the collar of his UNQLO jacket tattered, with bloodstains on the shirt he wore inside. His glasses were bent at odd angles, looking as though they were stuck onto his nose. The argument at home went out of control, and Kitamura, who couldn't win in a fight against his dad, ran out of the house.

"I'm really sorry... I haven't been able to say it..."

"Mm."

"There were really...a lot of things, sorry..."

"No worries."

Kitamura scratched his head guiltily, breathing out determinedly. He rubbed the swollen eye which could still be clearly seen amid the darkening sky, and licked his cracked lips,

"I know everyone's been worried sick about me, and I also know that Aisaka ran for the elections because of me. I know everything, but... The more everyone was worried about me, the more I couldn't tell you guys the reason... The stupid, immature and naive reason. After hearing it from Murase, you must think I'm extremely stupid too, right? That's why you came over to my house."

Kitamura looked at the surface of the river, slowly forcing the awkward sentences out of his mouth.

He liked the student council president...

During the summer student council camp, he had already heard about Kano Sumire going overseas to study after graduating, had known that her dreams would take her far away from him, and had also realized that he would never be good enough for her.

"She says that she wants to be an astronaut."

"As...tronaut!?"

"You think it's unrealistic, right? But a professor of aeronautical engineering from America invited her to study there, so this is not a dream, she's really going to America to learn how to build space shuttles. She says that she wants to be an aeronautical engineer so as to witness first-hand the new frontiers that mankind reaches."

Kano Sumire... Our big brother is... Ryuuji's mouth froze in the motion pronouncing the "As" of astronaut.

Everyone knew that the big brother was extremely clever, but no one would have thought that she...mankind, space... She was preparing to use her own hands to make contact with her distant and noble dream. Just the fact that she was going to America to study was so unrealistic that it made Ryuuji's head spin... No, not just that.

He said that he liked the student council president, which was something Ryuuji was hearing for the very first time. *Kitamura Yuusaku, say more of that!* Ryuuji lapsed into inner chaos, but Kitamura continued speaking as though he was talking to himself,

"So...it will surely end in rejection. I decided to give up, and had prepared to contain my feelings so that I could cheer the loudest for her on graduation day, and wave goodbye to her with a smile on my face. I had decided that I would have no regrets when graduation comes, that I would cheer for her from the bottom of my heart..."

His voice suddenly broke into sobs. Ryuuji swallowed, trying to regulate his breathing, waiting for Kitamura to continue while acting as if he wasn't really bothered.

"I had already decided, but suddenly, suddenly..."

"Mm..."

"After finishing the clean-up for the cultural festival, she suddenly said that she had to leave soon, that she was leaving the next month... That she had decided not to participate in the graduation ceremony so as to fit the timetable of her American university. She said that she would be leaving school, and would get her high school certificate through the mail. I was shocked, for I had originally thought that there were still 4 more months to go, but suddenly there was no time left. How was I to respond to something so unfair? I haven't had time to contain my feelings... and I couldn't exactly tell her, 'How am I supposed to smile on such short notice?' I couldn't say anything, and the president didn't say anything to me either... No, it could be that I wanted her to say something to me, but I don't really know."

Kitamura's right hand gripped the stone railing until his knuckles started turning white, but Ryuuji didn't know what to say.

"But, how do I put it... At that time, I thought, 'Oh, so my existence was nothing to her.' The one-sided crush that had gone on for two years meant nothing...nothing to her. Once again, I realized that the president would only look straight at her goal, and that there is no place for me in her heart. I'm nothing. There is no value or meaning in me, or the life that I have been leading for the past two years. That's all there is to it..."

He had already decided to let go of everything, to stop everything, to destroy everything and rebel. Kitamura ruffled his blond hair, smiling crookedly.

This model student had wanted to scream, "I want to let go of everything that I had held dear to myself! I want to let go of myself! All this is just garbage! I understand that much!"

"I thought...that maybe if I did that then the president would say to me, 'It's not like that.'... So that, ah... I'm such an idiot."

"You're not an idiot, you're just hurt."

Ryuuji imitated Kitamura's position and clutched the railing with his hand, receiving a nasty shock from the cold and roughness of the stone railing on his ungloved hand. *How could I lose!* Ryuuji tightened his grip. Right now, he deeply regretted thinking of the reason for Kitamura's actions as ridiculous.

Because he was serious, because he truly liked her, Kitamura was so frustrated. Ryuuji, who was sitting beside him listening, finally understood that. It might have been yet another one of his self-asserted misunderstandings, but Ryuuji still felt that way.

"But... You didn't have to decide to give up from the start, right? The both of you can work towards your respective dreams... and if it's possible... wouldn't it be good if the two of you could return to the same home? Would it be that hard to confess your feelings to her, hoping for that

result? Though big brother's ability is intimidating, and her dream is so large that it's scary, there are no ranks in the various occupations are there? Being a white-collar office worker isn't worse than being an astronaut. No matter if one is a bar hostess, a mangaka, a writer, a fisherman, an architect, a salesman, or a teacher, it'll be worthy of praise if one is committed to one's work. Why do you think of such things and assume that you're not good enough for her?"

"I...can't see it that way."

Kitamura's voice went low,

"I don't think that I'll ever be good enough for the president, who has the ability to surmount any obstacle. I know that I won't be able to have a goal that is on the same level as hers, and I feel embarrassed by that. I want to catch up with the president, who's way ahead of me, but I can't... I don't want to be a burden to her, and I don't want her to see me as someone who slows her down. But no matter how hard I try, I could never be on the same level as her, no foreigner would ask me to study overseas, and it's impossible for me to drop out now and go overseas, I can't do anything... In the end, I'm just another one of the 'junior's who's in love with the student council president...'"

"Stop crying."

"...I'm not crying."

Ryuuji's chest was hurting.

Kitamura letting go of his love for Kano Sumire, Ryuuji understood his feelings. There was nothing wrong with "no ranks in the various occupations", and it was simple to say, which was why Ryuuji was able to say it so easily, even though it was merely a formality. Astronauts have to go through extremely stringent selection tests, and only a select few can become astronauts, for their work is extremely hard. They shoulder the burden of all the wishes and hopes of mankind. No matter how successful one is in another occupation, no matter how rich one becomes, the level

between the two will still be different. Ryuuji also understood that, though his own sense of morality stopped him from saying so.

Even if he could wave to her from the ground, he would never be on equal terms with her. The distance between them was just too great.

I'm very clear about that.

"That's the reason for my hair colour. I also tried running away from home, and though my parents were angry, they still tried to protect me. But finally, today...they asked me, 'Are you seriously thinking about your future?', 'We've heard that you won't run for student council president?', I immediately replied, 'I don't want to go to school anymore!'"

"You're really...how should I say it, really stubborn..."

"In the end I was beaten quite badly, as you can see by how I look right now. It was my first time... I was surprised at many new experiences, that it really does hurt to be beaten. And it's no wonder that my father would be angry, since I ran away from home because I was afraid of my angry father. How was I supposed to tell them the real reason behind my desire to drop out of school? Was I expected to tell them that I was like this because of an unrequited love?"

"I still have to ask you, do you really want to drop out?"

"Of course not, I never intended to drop out. My wish was to... If everything would go according to my plan, I would wish for the president to leave after graduation as originally planned, as I succeed her position as student council president and tell her, 'Leave everything to me!'... hoping that the president would think that I've become a reliable man."

"So you want her to see the good parts of your character even if you're unable to make her fall in love with you."

"Ah, so there was this kind of way too. I didn't even think of that."

Ryuuji laughed in spite of himself, and attempted to repeat Kitamura's wish in his head. He finally realized,

"So it's actually like this... You really want to become student council president, don't you?"

"Have I been found out?"

Kitamura started laughing too, revealing his secret in a low voice,

"Yes, I really want to be a great student council president. The student council vice-president was chosen by the president, so I was extremely happy when the president chose me to be her vice-president, thinking that she finally recognized my abilities to a certain extent. But the president is leaving soon... If I become the president, it would symbolize the ending of everything, that everything has ended... No, though it had already been decided that everything would end... It doesn't make a difference whether I become the student council president or not, since I'll still be separated from her... but I don't want to go against my own feelings of 'wanting to become the president', and I don't want to deny the feelings I had when I was chosen to be the vice-president. I want the president to recognize me as a man, I want to become the new student council president who's endorsed by the outgoing president, that kind of man. But on the other hand, I don't want to become the new president. Because it would signal the end of everything. No, actually everything has already ended... Anyway, I've been constantly bound by such conflicting and repetitive feelings."

"To be unable to obtain what one desires, that's life isn't it..."

Ryuuji suddenly had a sense of deja vu, and felt an overwhelming urge to smile after he thought of the reason for that feeling. His breath came out as a white cloud, as the corners of his mouth crinkled into a smile.

"Why are you smiling all of a sudden?"

"Nothing, I just thought of something... Taiga said the exact same thing in spring. She has also met with many obstacles in her life... The two of us

were talking about the complications of life in the family restaurant, and the enraged Taiga even kicked the utility pole until it bent. "

"Oh, Aisaka is indeed on a different level than me."

Ryuuji looked up at the night sky, looking for the constellation of Orion that hung quietly in a corner of the sky.

On the day that Taiga left behind her tears and the two of them moved ahead together, the stars were all shining brightly above them.

"Let me ask you... Can you see Orion in America...?"

Kitamura, who was also looking up at the sky, asked.

"Should be able to... But you shouldn't be able to see it in the same season, right? And America's a huge country."

"Oh... So it won't be the same thing that we see here. You're right, since America's so far away."

"But it's nothing compared to the distance between two stars... Even if stars fall from the sky, even if the arrangements of the constellations are changed, you'll still see the same thing. Even if she's not by your side and thus is unable to look at the stars with you, whenever seasons change and night falls, she'll be able to see the same stars - the exact same thing."

"That's right. Some things will never change."

"Looking up at the night sky to look at a star, thinking about a certain person who's looking at the same star, this feeling will never disappear."

"No matter how far apart the two of you are, as long as you understand this..."

"That's strange? Takasu, just now..."

"Hmm?"

Kitamura suddenly looked around and pointed in a certain direction. Just then Ryuuji heard a voice,

"RYUU-JI-!!!"

"YOU-STUPID-DOG!!!"

A shadow with long streaking hair was making its way though the tall grass. Wearing a guy's scarf and a hooded long-sleeved T-shirt over her one piece western dress, Taiga, whose image redefined the word "messy", went in the completely wrong direction while shouting for Ryuuji.

"Oh darn, I don't want a girl to see me like this."

Kitamura stood up and dusted himself off without turning around, only waving to Ryuuji,

"I'm going home. See you at school tomorrow."

"Kitamura... Are you alright?"

"Yeah, no problem. I'll apologize to my father... I've already decided to apologize properly."

Ryuuji stood up to look at the disappearing figure, but at the exact same time...

"Ah! I found you! Stupid Ryuuji!"

She shouldn't have seen Kitamura, who had just left. She immediately charged at Ryuuji with a horrifying expression on her face once she had him in her sights. She was probably preparing to give him a huge scolding, or even beat him up. Ryuuji had already prepared himself both physically and mentally, relaxing the joints in his body so as to avoid the punches that would soon be coming from all directions.

"You idiot! I told you to wait, didn't I! What are you doing here!?"

"Ah...!"

Taiga, who seemed to have teleported, swiftly stuffed her icy hands into the collar of Ryuuji's shirt.

This move was far more effective than a simple punch. The unexpected coldness pushed Ryuuji into the dark abyss of the netherworld.

"I ran out after you, but you had already disappeared. So I asked a passerby if an extremely ugly and scary fellow had run past, and the trembling passerby told me that you'd gone to the walkway beside the river to look for prey. You're such a wild dog... You've even caused severe mental trauma to an innocent passerby..."

The two of them walked side by side in the wild grass that was almost as high as a human being. Being able to see one's breath coming out in white mists alerted them to the coldness of the night. Their bodies trembled in response to the cold weather.

"Hey... Did you really beat Kitamura-kun up...?"

"I didn't."

"Then what were you doing at this time? And what was the call about?"

"I'm not telling you."

Ryuuji intended to keep his earlier conversation with Kitamura a secret that he would take to the grave. *Because it was me, that's why Kitamura was willing to talk about the real reason behind his actions. So even if Taiga beats me up, hits all of my pressure points, hangs me from a cross, leaves me on a deserted island, or even if she beheads me in public... I won't tell her.* Ryuuji subconsciously stared at his feet, but was suddenly attacked from behind...

"Argh... gah...!"

He never expected himself to really get strangled. The river flowing beside them now looked like the the river of blood flowing in hell, making Ryuuji want to struggle for his life.

"Hold on a second."

"Huh...?"

Ryuuji noticed something soft encompassing his neck.

Taiga imitated the way in which Ryuuji had tied the scarf around her neck to put the scarf onto Ryuuji's neck. She stretched her body to its limit in a bid to reach his neck, her violent and rough actions resulting in an act of strangulation when coupled with the height difference between the two. Finally, the scarf was tied around Ryuuji's neck like a noose.

"Gah!"

"Shut up..."

The noose around his neck suddenly tightened... No, it was a signal from Taiga to tell Ryuuji that her work was done. Ryuuji quickly loosened the cashmere scarf around his neck, finally breaking free of the constriction that was preventing him from breathing normally. A soft warmth enveloped Ryuuji in an instant.

The fragrance that he detected wasn't his own smell, but the smell of Taiga's hair, the sweet smell of flowers. After being borrowed a few times, the smell had already seeped into the muffler.

The smell of a girl, or the smell of shampoo? Or is it the smell from the back of her neck or the back of her ears? Whatever it was, it was extremely warm. Ryuuji imitated Taiga's actions in covering his nose with the cashmere scarf that still contained traces of Taiga's body heat, breathing into his hands to warm himself up. Amid the freezing cold of the night wind, Ryuuji could finally lift his head.

On the pathway that held no traces of human presence, with only the distant sounds of cars, the only sounds left were the sound of the wind, the sound of their footsteps, and the sound of the river. In the seemingly limitless skyline, the stars were shining as brightly as that night. Even though they were extremely far away, even though he couldn't really see

them, even though they might be mere shadows of the past, the stars still continued to shine brightly above Ryuuji, and they probably would still be there tomorrow. Be it crying or laughing, there is still existence. This was what Ryuuji thought. On a night that the cold rain descended onto the earth, on a night that he couldn't stop himself from shivering from the cold, on a night that he didn't want to open his eyes. Even on a night such as this, the stars were still shining on the other side of the clouds.

They were still there.

The things that were just as unchanging as the stars must be the same.

"Aren't you cold?"

"I'm very hot."

Taiga's voice was just like normal, a tinge of coldness coupled with a dash of unpleasantness, just like the stars that shone in the cold gusts. Ryuuji helped to place the hood of her hooded T-shirt over her head amid her messy hair. Taiga didn't say anything and just waited till he finished before pulling her hair out of the hood so that the hood could be pulled over her eyes.

"...So what were you doing here?"

Speaking in a soft voice, Taiga used the hood and her hair to shield her face from Ryuuji.

"I already said that I won't tell you."

It made no difference whether he could see her face or not.

"I see..."

The two of them carried on an on-off conversation while breathing out into their hands to warm up. Their almost freezing bodies warming up bit by bit.

They placed their hands into their pockets, continuing to walk side by side. Even if they weren't holding hands, Taiga would never leave Ryuuji's side. The pair of eyes that were covered by the hood secretly glinted in the night, her footsteps keeping pace with Ryuuji's.

"Taiga.", Ryuuji called out soundlessly.

"Taiga, Kitamura isn't a star. He's not an image that's tens of thousands of light years away.

He's just like you, a person who would sometimes be frustrated, sometimes stopping in his tracks, but always stepping forward under the watchful eyes of the stars shining above him. All stars eventually fall, right? Taiga, Kitamura, other people and I would see the exact same star vanish. People always look up at the stars in the night sky like this, thinking of a certain someone who was looking at the same star in a certain place, and then continue to move on.

So Taiga, you're definitely not alone. Even if you say, 'I can live by myself, no problem.' But there will definitely be one person, and right now it's me, who will look up at the same star together with you, even if one day the star-filled sky changes its shape, for there will always be stars hanging overhead."

"Ryuuji, I'm hungry."

"Oh... Let's go to the convenience store to get some oden?"

After a while...

"Okay!"

Taiga's voice resounded in the silent night.

* * *

The next day was Friday.

Kitamura had already dyed his hair back into the black colour that could only be described as "Maruo", and was putting on his indoor shoes in the entrance of the school building. "Isn't that Kitamura?" "He's come back into the world of the living." "Which means... Could it be!?" Amid the whisperings,

Kitamura slowly stepped forward, his target being...

"Tomorrow's voting day!"

"I'll send everyone who doesn't vote to the deepest recesses of hell... Ah?"

Taiga and Ryuuji were garnering last minute votes, both holding microphones in one hand. They were speechless upon seeing Kitamura.

"Kitamura..."

"Kitamura-kun..."

Kitamura smiled,

"I'm sorry, but the two of you have done enough... No, it should be, I won't allow the two of you to continue this! I, Kitamura Yuusaku, will lead this school to greatness!"

At that moment.

"We've been waiting for that!" The students who had just walked into the school building started to applaud Kitamura. The members who were part of the original plan also started to clap alongside everyone else. Ami, who had just walked into the building, revealed a shocked expression for a moment as someone told her the news, but then started clapping in a fashion that befitted her public image.

He had finally decided. Ryuuji exchanged a look with his best friend, a wide smile creeping onto his face. "Oh no, Takasu-kun's gone mad!" Even with such remarks, Ryuuji's expression didn't change.

Chapter 6

Because the news had come so suddenly...

"WHAT...!?"

Ryuuji stared unblinkingly at the face of the single woman (30) in front of him. After homeroom, he had been summoned to the teachers' office. At the moment, the office was saturated with an awkward atmosphere.

"Do-Don't stare at me with such a sharp gaze... I'm very sensitive about my wrinkles..."

"No, I wasn't looking at those. Is that true, Sensei? Could you have made a mistake?"

"It's true, Kitamura-kun still has not handed in his application. The class teacher of 2-A has already confirmed with the student council member there, the one who said that he would run for the election if Kitamura-kun didn't."

"Ah, Murase... When I talked to him during the lunch break, he still thought that Kitamura would run for the election and was extremely happy about it..."

"I see... Is Kitamura-kun still in class?"

"I'm not sure about that, I came as soon as you called me. But... Sensei, why are you asking me about this? Shouldn't you be asking him about it?"

"I don't want to interrogate him in public... Everyone's so happy about Kitamura running for student council elections, so no matter how he answered to 'You haven't handed in your application form. Are you not running after all?', it would place enormous pressure on him..."

It appeared that not even the single woman knew what to do. She sat on her seat, sighing deeply, and then twisted her back forcefully, cracking her spine loudly. Seeing this, Ryuuji felt an overwhelming urge to bow and tell

her "Thank you for your hard work." She had it just as bad as Ryuuji... No, maybe even worse. Recently, the thirty year-old single class teacher had also been constantly worrying about Kitamura, resulting in her back aches. She had worked so hard and had worried so much, but in the end, it still ended up like this. Kitamura still had not turned in his application for the student council president elections.

What did his promise this morning mean? Did he change his mind? No, he probably forgot to hand in his application. If that was the reason, then it's too early to assume anything. It'll be better to just ask Kitamura himself as we probably won't be able to guess the correct answer by ourselves.

"Anyway, I'll bring him here first."

"I'll leave it to you. The rules state that if his application isn't received by four o'clock, then he will not be able to participate in the election."

Ryuuji bowed hurriedly ran out of the teacher's office. Because he had been admonished by a teacher on the way, "Stop running!", he could only walk with as big a stride as he could manage back to the classroom, climbing the stairs hurriedly.

Just like the rest of the student population, Ryuuji had assumed that Kitamura had already handed in his application. What if he had already gone home?

"Oh!"

"What's wrong, Takasu?"

He's still here. As he opened the door to the classroom, Ryuuji saw Kitamura, who was at his desk, casually packing his bag to go home. There were still a few students in class, but Taiga, Minori, Noto and the rest of the usual people were nowhere to be found.

"Where are Taiga and the others...?"

"They've gone with Ami and the others to the pastry and coffee cafe that just opened in front of the train station. Noto and Haruta also went with them. They asked me to go along, but I rejected them. Because you weren't in class, they left you behind. We're really dispensable aren't we."

Kitamura wore his usual cheerful smile. Ryuuji wanted to speak, but stared at the smiling face.

"Hey, what's wrong? Is there something on my face? Ah, it's the bandage isn't it."

Kitamura sighed while jokingly touching the cut on his mouth.

"Kitamura, now isn't the time to casually drink coffee, is it?"

"..."

Kitamura's smile immediately froze, the eyes behind the glasses showing a trace of uncertainty. Looking at his expression, Ryuuji understood that he didn't forget to hand in his application.

Kitamura was still hesitating.

Just what is this guy trying to do!? Ryuuji wanted to hold his head and shout it out to the school, but he swallowed his rage at the last moment, resisting a wave of tiredness and fighting to keep his cool. It wouldn't do anything for him to be frustrated, and there would be no meaning in forcing Kitamura to hand in his application. It wasn't to say that Kitamura would be doing the right thing by running for student council president, but that forcing him to run would do nothing to unravel his complicated feelings.

There was no right or wrong regarding Kitamura's decision to run for the student council president, as it would simply be his own decision. There was no right or wrong answer or decision. Asking oneself to answer that question was a question of individual will and ambition. A person who rebels to show his inner frustration will not go along with decisions that

other people make for him. Ryuuji finally understood that point. Kitamura had already understood that himself, which was why he spent so much time hesitating between the two choices, trying to find the answer.

The problem was that there wasn't any time left.

"The single woman says that you have to hand in your application form before four o'clock."

Looking at the clock, it was currently three-forty in the afternoon. There was still twenty minutes.

"What are you planning to do? Do you really want to..."

Ryuuji didn't want to interfere in Kitamura's decision. Having said that though, he still...

"Let's go home, Takasu."

"What!?"

The short reply left Ryuuji speechless.

"Let the two of us, the dispensable people, go home together."

Wrong interpretation. Kitamura wasn't hesitating; he had already decided not to run for student council president.

"Go, Go home... Would that be alright? Everyone believes that you'll run. Are you serious about this?"

"I changed my mind. After thinking about it, I decided not to run after all."

"You, you still have twenty minutes to reconsider!"

"No, I've already made up my mind, so stop trying to persuade me to do otherwise. Come on, pack your bag, I'll wait for you."

"Kitamura..."

Ryuuji couldn't say anything else since Kitamura had already decided. Since it had come to this, there was nothing left to say. He packed his bag under the impatient eyes of Kitamura, remembering that his muffler had been taken away by Taiga in the morning again. The two of them opened the classroom door and prepared to walk out into the corridor. Ryuuji started to worry about Kitamura again. Would this really be alright? Would this be enough?

He knew that worrying would do nothing to remedy the situation, since he would never be able to understand the decision. It was Kitamura's personal choice, be it good or bad. On the other hand, Kitamura was...

"It's been a long time since we've gone home together because I'm in the student council and the softball club... We haven't done this since we were first years, right?"

Way too casual.

"Oh, is that so... That's right..."

"Let's go somewhere to celebrate, shall we? Ami and the others are at the building in front of the train station, so we should avoid that... How about Sudouba? A pastry and coffee cafe sounds too girly anyway, so I'm not interested in that."

Looking at the figure of Kitamura walking ahead of him, Ryuuji finally let out the breath he had been holding in. *I give up.*

Yes, Ryuuji wanted to see Kitamura as the student council president, thinking of how he would thrive in that position like a fish in water, giving off the boundless energy reminiscent of the coach from hell. He would be extremely suitable! He would surely become a great student council president! But Kitamura chose the other option. Ryuuji was unable to predict the consequences of this choice, and that of Kitamura's future. Since he was unable to see it,... he decided to walk alongside him, to see his future together, continuing to be the best friend in the life that Kitamura had chosen.

Right! Ryuuji jogged to catch up with Kitamura, and the two guys walked side by side rather oddly,

"That's right, guys should go to Sudouba. I'll order a black coffee and a spicy hotdog."

"What a mature choice. I'll have coffee too, and cinnamon toast... No, that's too girly. I'll have a cheese toast."

"Good choice. How could real men eat cream after school?"

"That's absolutely right, you shouldn't add cream to your coffee either!"

"I'm not adding it! We'll drink black coffee while staring at the middle-aged boss of Sudouba!"

"Sudo-san, is it!? I want the sports section!"

"Ah, me too!"

Ryuuji and Kitamura raised their hands in a strange fashion and walked out of the classroom. As the two of them talked about random topics while walking along the corridor, Ryuuji thought,

Everything is destined.

This assertion is not admitting defeat, but just an objective assertion of the truth.

Everything was predetermined by fate. No matter how frustrated or how much one wished otherwise, when it came to it, one could only move forward on a path that only one's eyes could see. Each choice, each decision was a step towards the "end". After reaching this "end", one must make another decision, so that the "end" becomes a "checkpoint". Each of the destinations ahead was one's own decision, so one could only move forward.

That's why people hesitate. Considering all of the choices, one could lose hope and try to run away, because no excuse would ever be sufficient. No

matter how dangerous the long journey in life was, or how one admits to being dealt the short end of the stick, everything that happens in life is the result of one's own choices, a road chosen by oneself. Even if this path is hard, and there's no chance of changing past choices, one cannot place the blame on others. No matter how angry or frustrated one is, one is alone on that path, for there is no one to replace you.

"Ah... I haven't seen such a beautiful sunset for some time now."

"Mm..."

And then you believe.

The end of the path that Kitamura has chosen would surely be "very Kitamura". This is how Kitamura opens up the only way for himself, and there is no right or wrong in this decision. The corridor that was dyed orange by the setting sun made Kitamura scrunch his eyes as he looked out of the window. He stopped, probably to look at the beautiful sunset.

"Right... I'm really surprised that we haven't gone home together for over a year already. The main reason is because of my student council activities, which take place everyday."

"I remember we started talking because we were sitting beside each other on the bus during the class trip in May. You joined the student council shortly after that."

"That's right, it's so nostalgic... We hadn't even talked to each other before May because you were always pitifully guarding yourself against other people."

"Of course I have to guard against other people! I had already heard other people saying that I was a delinquent on the day of the school entrance ceremony. You were also distancing yourself from me because of those rumours, weren't you?"

"No, you misunderstood me. I didn't really care about my classmates since something else had caught my attention immediately after entering

school... Ah, I haven't told you about what happened then, have I? And I thought that I would never talk about it ever again..."

Under the dying rays of the setting sun, Kitamura suddenly turned to face the notice board.

On the notice board was the black and inauspiciously-coloured poster for Taiga's election campaign. Kitamura lightly took out one of the pins holding the poster in place, taking out a piece of paper that was hidden underneath the poster. Manly-looking calligraphy stared up from the piece of paper, "Students are not allowed to run in the corridor - from the student council". Kitamura pinned the poster back into its original place, and pinned the piece of paper beside it.

Ryuuji followed Kitamura's actions, listening as he continued.

"I was very filled with enthusiasm, when I first entered this school, as I hoped that I would be different from how I was in middle school. I had a very unhappy time in middle school, so I wanted to live happily in this new world."

"Oh..."

"To talk about a happy high school life, one must have a girlfriend, right? At that time, I heard that there was an extremely cute girl from another class who came from a famous private middle school, and was rumoured to be the daughter of a very wealthy family. My interest was piqued, and I went to see her... and it was love at first sight. How could anyone be so cute...? My life would be rosy if only I could be friends with such a cute girl. But I saw that the scores of guys who confessed their feelings for her came back crying, hearing that they were either humiliated verbally or threatened with violence, destroying all traces of their manly pride. Do you know who I'm talking about?"

"Yes... Please continue."

Ryuuji didn't tell Kitamura that he already knew as he merely looked at the pair of spectacles that was reflecting light off it.

"I was very excited as I didn't know what kind of answer the pretty girl would give me, but I really wanted to know. So on a certain day, I went to Aisaka's- Ah! I said it. Never mind. Yes, I went to Aisaka's class and called her out, telling her after making sure that no one was around at the stairwell, 'You're really pretty!' But Aisaka screamed, 'You're so disgusting!' and gave me a beautiful straight punch with her left hand, but stopped about one centimetre away from the bridge of my nose. A gust of wind even blew in its wake... It was the first time I had met a girl like this, so I was really excited. So I immediately stood up again and confessed to her, 'That's great! I like your straightforwardness!' and then I stretched out my hand like this. But Aisaka thought that I wanted to assault her, and shouted unhesitatingly, 'Go to hell! Pervert!' This time it was a right hook, and it didn't stop, scoring a perfect hit on my left kidney. Of course, I was unable to stand up after this, so I just laid there on the floor, listening to Aisaka's fading footsteps."

"That was a rather stupid thing to do... and you were really pitiful..."

"Yes, it was extremely pitiful, and it was very painful, and she hated me. Ah, my rosy high school life left me just like that... Just as I was feeling sad, someone appeared from the shadows of the stairwell, Kano Sumire. 'I saw everything! First year, you were rejected, right? Don't worry, your high school life has just started! Join the student council! There are endless boring administrative works to be done everyday! Being busy will make you lively again!' When I snapped back to reality, I was already in the student council room. Actually, that is a favourite trick of us student council members, since we're always short-handed when it comes to administrative duties, so we always drag in bored-looking first years in to do the work for us. I was one of them."

Us student council members... Kitamura didn't notice his own words as he looked up at the setting sun,

"I was dragged in, and joined the student council, and then... all the way until now. I became friends with Aisaka, the rosy high school life I had dreamed of was finally here, as we ate lunch together, went to the beach

together, danced together at the cultural festival... Yes, Aisaka even told me that she liked me. But what she really wanted to say was not that she liked me..."

Kitamura smiled at Ryuuji,

"...Never mind, it's not something I should say. Anyway, I'm happy, for my high school life is rosy even if I don't have a girlfriend. The first shaky step that I took when the president called out to me and dragged me by the arm wasn't for waste. From there, from that first step, I unlocked the happy things in my life. I really think that way, but..."

Kitamura suddenly stumbled over his words, his smile blown away by the wind.

No, it's because he can't move. His stiff legs conveyed that message. Even if he had already decided not to run for student council elections and to go home together with Ryuuji, he still couldn't move.

He had already chosen one of the two choices, but he was still unable to move towards his next destination.

The next sentence could have been directed at himself,

"I don't dislike the idea of becoming student council president, but I just don't want to say goodbye to the president. But no matter how much I wish otherwise, no matter how large a tantrum I throw, time will not stop, nor will reality change. In the end... I couldn't decide whether to become student council president or not. Actually... Actually I only wanted to run away to deny the fact that the president would soon be leaving. I wanted to run away to a world where the president wouldn't leave... but, that kind of world does not exist."

Ryuuji silently stared at his best friend's head, continuing to stand beside him.

"There are no hiding places. I can only move forward in the real world. That's why I have to accept reality, so that I can move forward. I know all

of this, but even then, I can never... take the next step. My legs turn to jelly, they resist my movement with all their might, I can't move to make myself accept the reality of the situation. That's not my wish. Though I know that I must move forward, I don't want to take the next step. I even wanted time to stop... That's all I thought about... All these stupid things..."

The rays of the setting sun started to sting their eyes.

After saying that, Kitamura lapsed into silence, slumping down onto the ground.

Can I tell him that everything is alright? Ryuuji didn't know what to say. *It's alright, the pain of the unrequited love will vanish someday. Would it be alright to say something so depressing? Or should I say that perhaps someday Big Brother will notice your good points and turn back?*

No, that's wrong.

He knows that he must step into the real world, but his legs refuse to listen to him. Right now, Kitamura did not need any comforting or cheering up, he doesn't need any of these right now...

"Hey...!"

Ryuuji was shocked at the sound of that voice.

Behind Kitamura, who was sitting on the ground, was a long shadow. The shadow seemed to surround Kitamura on all sides, implying that the person would definitely not be smiling.

Looking at Ryuuji, the other person only raised her eyebrow slightly - such a troublesome girl.

"Hey, idiot."

"...!"

Kitamura's shoulders shook.

He was unable to turn back, and could only expose his unprotected back to the girl he liked.

"I came here looking for people who looked bored. Do you have any suggestions? The vice-president suddenly disappeared, leaving behind a mountain of paperwork."

"...No. And our expressions are extremely interesting right now."

"There's no hope for you, even your words are boring."

"...I'm sorry."

"If you're really sorry, then quickly stand up! If you have the time to think about useless things, then quickly take the first step!"

Bang! Kano Sumire seemed to be giving him an example to follow as she stomped on the ground behind Kitamura. Kitamura's shoulder shook again due to his surprise at the loud sound and the overpowering aura.

"Or are you planning to abandon all those kids who decided to place their hopes and trust in you? Are you the kind of man who would do that? Huh? Have these two years meant nothing to you? Do you really not need it anymore? Your feelings, have you lifted your foot yet? Have you lifted your foot to take that next step? Where do you intend to place that foot? In front of you, right? Do you intend to place your raised foot to the side or behind you, to run away? Doesn't the path you have chosen point forward? Well? Do you intend to spend the rest of your life as the loser you are right now, desperately wishing that time would stop or thinking about new ways to run away? Are you stupid?"

Sumire said everything in a low, fear-inducing voice in one breath. Ryuuji heard her loud and clear, and Kitamura must have heard her as well.



Sumire only said one sentence, one single, short sentence...

"You want to take that step forward, right!? You hesitate precisely because you want to take that step forward, right? A person who doesn't want to take that step wouldn't even be frustrated over whether to move forward or not! It's precisely because you're afraid to move forward! You know that best! You've already made that decision in your heart! Just step forward! Otherwise, what do you want to do!?"

"Go!"

"Go! Go! Go! Move forward! Move! Run!"

"Move onto the path that Kitamura Yuusaku should walk on!"

"You're not allowed to stop here!"

"Go!"

Kano Sumire shouted.

"I will be watching you, to see what kind of student council president you become, and how you will lead the students of this school. No matter how far away I am, I will still be watching you. You're not allowed to slack off, for no one can escape from these eyes of mine, do you hear me!?"

She suddenly hit Kitamura on the back. A piece of paper slapped onto his back along with the hand, which read "Student Council President Election Application Form".

So that's how it is... Ryuuji thought.

"A person who hesitates over whether to move forward or not doesn't need support or comfort, but a voice that pushes him forward, and a forceful and slightly painful push that will send him forward to where he needs to be. Like this, he will have the courage and strength to stand up by himself."

"That's it."

Kano Sumire gave a manly grin and waved at Ryuuji. She didn't turn back but merely strode forward purposefully as usual, leaving unhesitantly.

The rays of the evening sun still stung their eyes, the blinding orange rays bouncing off the walls of the corridor. The retreating figure of the big brother was bathed in the strong light, disappearing in an instant.

Even then.

"Ah... How should I put it...? What's the time now?"

"Three fifty-eight."

"The president is truly a big star, always appearing at the most crucial of times."

Clutching the piece of paper that Sumire gave him, Kitamura finally stood up.

He looked up at the sky in the same position as on a certain night, took off his glasses, rubbing his eyes roughly before fixing his fringe.

"Sorry, I suddenly have something I must do, so it looks like I won't be able to go to Sudouba with you."

He put on his glasses once again.

Kitamura Yuusaku, Ryuuji's unchanging best friend, revealed his usual honest smile.

"Ah, that's a pity. Never mind, we'll just go some other day."

"Yes, we must go some other day."

When there's a will, there's a way. That saying was right. Ryuuji smiled in response to Kitamura. *I knew that he would be like this in the end, but it was rather slow, seeing that everything has been resolved. Ah~ right, I've always known that everything would turn out fine.*

In the corridor that Sumire had just left, Kitamura took her place as he strode away hurriedly but determinedly. He was probably headed towards the teachers' office. The single woman should be waiting for Kitamura anxiously.

"Do your best!" Ryuuji whispered, and walked in the opposite direction from Kitamura. With his back facing Kitamura, he stepped forward by himself - an exaggeration. He just wanted to go home.

After choosing their own paths, everyone moved forward.

That would be alright, because even then, one will not be lonely.

Everyone has their own destination which they are walking towards, and everyone is making their way forward alone. Their own choices, their own decisions, their own actions to opening the path ahead. Sometimes they will reach a crossroad, sometimes they will walk with a companion, and then bid their companion farewell, perhaps seeing them again some other day, maybe not.

All of the stars, and Orion that were seen that night would always be shining above everyone. Whether or not they can be seen by humans, they will always be there. There will be something that is unchanging in life.

When one has lost their way, their strength, and hope - this kind of situation awaits everyone on their path in life. In these kinds of situations, Ryuuji would choose to look up at the sky.

Looking up at the distant stars, thinking that a certain someone is also looking at the same star in another place. No matter how great the distance, even if he was unable to fly to that person, as long as he believed that the star that they were looking up at was the same, it would give him strength.

And then the night will come to an end as morning comes. In the morning, the stars are unable to be seen, as the sky would be an icy blue. Cold

gusts of wind would separate the clouds, announcing to the world that it would be a cold morning.

* * *

"So...cold...! Why does the gymnasium seem to be even colder on the inside than the outside in winter?"

"No, it's probably even colder outside... Brrrrrr..."

As he was shivering with Noto in the cold, Ryuuji contracted his body and rolled his hands into a tight ball in his pockets, feeling as though his fingers were going to freeze off.

The election took place during the club activity period on Saturday. The gymnasium where the elections were held was filled with sounds of shivering and complaints as the girls huddled together for warmth. "That's nice, but guys shouldn't do that!" Ryuuji wanted to say that. Just thinking about the acne-covered faces slowly moving closer... Just thinking about it made one feel even colder.

In short, today is extremely cold. It's cold and noisy, and we have to keep standing. Why can't they start now? Freezing students obviously will not give a warm reception. If everyone were to sit down, they'd just freeze their butts off. But there's also a problem with the gymnasium in the summer, as it's as hot as a sauna in summer. Anyway, nothing good will come out of holding events in the gymnasium.

Even so, the students of 2-C still stood there shivering, the thought of skipping the elections never entering their heads.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh...Uguuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu..."

Taiga had taken Ryuuji's scarf today too, covering her nose with it and making animal-like noises while looking like a masked criminal. Minori,

who was huddling closely to Taiga, kept their hands and feet together, and had worn her gym clothes under her clothes and jacket, causing her body to appear bloated. Maya and Nanako, on the other hand, were desperately trying to pull their sweaters down as far as possible, trying to keep warm. Ami was squeezing something in her jacket pocket; it looked like a heat pad. Her nice-girl facade forgotten, Ami wrinkled her eyebrows at the freezing weather.

The students of 2-C looked up at a guy on the stage.

The watermelon-skin hairstyle that had been returned to its original black colour shone brightly on stage, reflecting Maruo's style. His glasses were so clean that they were reflecting light, and his tightly-shut mouth appeared very reliable. Although he had a pitiful-looking cut by the side of his mouth, Kitamura still stood there with a resolute look in his eyes.

The expression on his face showed that he had already decided to face up to reality, and accept the pain that would surely come with the choice.

"Right... Microphone... Ah! The power's on already? Sorry for making everyone wait."

The emcee, a first-year boy from the student council, finally walked onto the stage. "So slow!" "Don't you know that it's freezing out here!" Complaints sounded from every corner of the gymnasium. But among the students, there were a group of strange people who clapped with a passion that did not belong in a freezing gymnasium, Ryuuji being one of them. The passion of the students of 2-C raised the temperature of the freezing gymnasium slightly.

"We shall now proceed with the student council president elections. There is only one candidate, the current student council vice-president, Kitamura Yuusaku."

Hearing the passionate cheers of his classmates, Kitamura waved back sheepishly. Off stage, there were happy smiles on the faces of Kano Sumire and the rest of the student council.

"Now we shall invite Kitamura-senpai onto the podium to sketch out his political manifesto!"

"Yes!"

Kitamura answered loudly, walking over to the microphone stand, adjusting it to the proper height.

"Maruo! Do your best!"

"Kitamura! Thank you for saving us from the clutches of the Palmtop Tiger!"

Kitamura acknowledged the support from his schoolmates by nodding and smiling, looking extremely reliable. Although it wasn't clear if Kitamura was purposely trying to erase the signs of his rebelliousness, at that moment, he looked extremely reliable.

Ryuuji crossed his frozen hands in front of his chest. *Very good, Kitamura. Looks like he has already mentally prepared himself for the eventual separation.* Kitamura's eyes didn't contain any trace of uncertainty or sadness, for he had already left those feelings behind, deciding to move forward. This was the aura of a real man.

"Hello everybody, I am Kitamura Yuusaku, I..."

Kitamura gripped the microphone with his right hand.

Go! Ryuuji silently willed him to continue..

His classmates, the student council, Kano Sumire, and every student who had hoped for Kitamura to run for the election must also have been holding their breaths in anticipation. *Go! Say something exciting. Let everyone look forward to a happy and fulfilling school life. Let everyone believe that you're the best candidate for the position of student council president. Tell everyone that Kitamura Yuusaku is qualified to be the student council president!*

"I!"

Kitamura opened his mouth as wide as it would go, taking a deep breath, and then shouted to the school... No...

"President! I! Love you!!!"

He shouted to a girl below stage,

"I'm standing here right now because I like you! I know I'll never be good enough for you! And that I must forget you, because you're going to a faraway place! But I have to tell you this no matter what! Your voice, everything you say to me always encourages me! Therefore, I want to ask you a question! President... do you have any feelings for me!? I always believed that you must have some feelings for me! So even now, when I should have given up, I'm still unable to give up! I'm begging you! Please, please please please give me an answer! Do I have no hope at all!? Is there really no special destiny for you and me!?"

After shouting it out, the red-faced Kitamura bowed deeply to Sumire.

Ryuuji's mind went blank.

Everyone in the gymnasium had their mouths open in amazement.

Not just the students, even the teaching staff were shocked into submission. The single woman, Haruta, everyone widened their eyes in shock, replaying the previous scene in their heads. Everyone was too astonished at the sudden confession to react. Yes, no one, not even Taiga, was able to react. Ryuuji looked at Taiga, who was standing up front. Taiga was rigid, just like a statue, her feelings unreadable. Even when everyone around her started to talk loudly, Taiga still froze in that position.

"A confession...?"

"It was a confession... right?"

"Wh-Wh-What's going on? He confessed to the big brother!?"

The noise gradually evolved into an excited chatter. Kitamura, who was clenching his teeth, was blushing even more furiously by the second. But even at this time, Ryuuji was still unable to move.

Kitamura had finally taken that uncertain step forward, but the choice that he had made wasn't "running for elections" as Ryuuji had thought, but to "change the unacceptable reality".

This was his last struggle against the unchanging reality that he hated. Kitamura had neither accepted reality nor rejected it. He had chosen to resist it like a man.

What will happen? How will the future change?

"Big brother, answer him, answer him!!!"

"That's right, let us hear your answer!"

"Give her the microphone!"

The excited crowd snatched the microphone from the dazed student council member, stuffing it into Sumire's face like paparazzi.

Sumire looked at Kitamura as their eyes met. Even Kitamura's ears were red, but Sumire's expression didn't change. She raised an eyebrow in her usual fashion, looking as though she had just heard something humorous...

"...So that's what he says."

She spoke into the microphone nonchalantly.

Sumire looked away from Kitamura and shrugged her shoulders at the student population, revealing a smile, saying,

"What do you think? The student council vice-president Kitamura Yuusaku is an interesting guy, isn't he? With such an interesting guy as the student

council president, this school will surely become even more interesting. So please vote for this interesting guy!"

Her brilliant speech won the applause of the entire school, as Kitamura's confession was covered by the waves of noise and laughter. "I'm voting for him!" "Me too, me too!" Kitamura, who had no competitor in the first place, suddenly saw a sharp increase in the number of votes for him.

"Ah..."

Kitamura purposely hugged his head and looked to the sky with exaggerated movements. His confession in front of the whole school had been cleverly turned into a campaign speech to garner votes, and it looked like he had been rejected. Faced with such an answer, Kitamura leaned on the microphone stand pitifully and lowered his head, looking as if he was completing a pre-rehearsed routine.

Kitamura's one-sided feelings had been crushed into powder.

Nothing was left.

Kitamura had tried to change reality, but he had failed.

The shoulders of the man who had lowered his head on stage now trembled as tears rolled down his cheeks. Ryuuji couldn't have been the only one who noticed that... probably.

Haruta, who had remained just below the stage throughout the excitement, put his arm around Kitamura's shoulder's as he helped him off the stage. Noto also waited at the stairs leading up the stage, helping to shield Kitamura's face from the crowd. Kitamura still refused to raise his head, as Taiga remained frozen in position.

"The voting will be conducted on special forms that will be..." Ryuuji didn't bothering listening to the instructions as he thought about what he should do.

What can he do for the friend who had been hurt under the same stars? Ryuuji tightened his facial muscles as he sketched out the night sky in his mind.

* * *

"Kano-senpai!"

The corridor and stairways were flooded with students returning to class. But even then, Ryuuji still chased after a certain girl as best he could, reaching the highest level of the school that he normally wouldn't go to - the third-year classroom corridor.

Upon hearing Ryuuji's voice, Sumire, who was just about to turn into her classroom, turned around. Seeing Ryuuji, she raised a hand in greeting.

"What's happening!? Kano, is it another confession!?"

"Shut up, go into class, I'll be back soon."

With her usual smile, Sumire side-stepped her classmate's teasing and walked towards Ryuuji. But she stopped Ryuuji from speaking, and said,

"It's a bit noisy here, follow me."

Ryuuji followed her to the stairwell that led to the rooftop. Even though the noises from the third-year classroom corridor could still be heard, the two of them could hear each other more clearly than in the corridor.

"Yes? Takasu, anything you want to say?"

"Why didn't you give him a definite answer?"

Ryuuji glared at Sumire unreasonably, but Sumire stood there steadily, listening to Ryuuji speak with a royally casual attitude. Even Ryuuji's glare

did not have the intended effect on her, but even then, Ryuuji still faced her,

"Why do you intend to escape from it? Didn't you tell Kitamura to move forward just yesterday? Wasn't it you who said those words, Senpai? Why did you expound such noble truths if you yourself attempt to escape as if those truths do not apply to you?"

Nobody is forcing the two of them to fall in love, it can't be helped if she really doesn't like him. But that wasn't the problem. Ryuuji was unable to forgive Sumire for deftly evading the boy who had confessed his love for her in front of the whole school, placing herself outside the zone of disturbance, watching from the sidelines as he fell.

Pushing Kitamura forward harder than anyone else, telling him to keep moving forward, and giving him the courage that he needed. Weren't all these Sumire's actions?

"I only told him to run for the elections, not to confess. Didn't you hear it as well?"

"By saying such things... Do you intend to continue running away...?"

"What's wrong with running away? People who are straightforward are well-liked, that's a fact. But the person who only recognizes one single way forward can only be described as clumsy, so Kitamura better learn to be a bit cleverer and to adapt to situations quicker. You too."

"To be cleverer you say...? Just like you!?"

Ryuuji clenched his teeth tightly, but Sumire merely smiled,

"Yes. Just like me. Clever, skillful, and able to run away when the situation calls for it. That's right, learn more with this as your goal... That's the difference."

Sumire pointed to her own head jokingly, her beautifully sculpted face still clad in a casual smile. Ryuuji was unable to respond or even rebut her. It

was not because Sumire spoke the truth, but because Ryuuji didn't have enough time to think over his response calmly. But he wouldn't give up. Although he didn't want to give up, he was unable to do anything in the face of Sumire's cold and calculating smile.

Not everyone is like you!

Don't you wish you could have everything too?

Looking up at the sky, swallowing the tears that flow down, moving forward with all your might even though the only unchanging things in this world are the stars. The person who would soon step into the rocket granted to her by heaven and blast off into space obviously would not understand the pain and frustration of normal people.

But Ryuuji couldn't say it. Everything that had happened to Ryuuji and his friends, Taiga and Kitamura, everything that had happened to them were stuck in his throat. If only he had the courage and power to spit it out. Ryuuji didn't want to admit defeat to everything, but he looked like a caged animal, only able to gnash his fangs in thin air.

Looking at Ryuuji, Sumire's facial expression softened,

"Takasu Ryuuji, you're such a good friend. I would have liked to know you better, but unfortunately, there isn't anytime left, goodbye. Carry on being best friends with Kitamura, and prevent him from being taken advantage of by a clever 'serpent' like me... That's all I have to say."

That was it.

Sumire quietly gave a look that alluded to her apparently enlightened being, turning to walk away while ignoring Ryuuji's glare. Ryuuji didn't notice that he was being left behind for a moment as he gaped at her moving figure.

No...

Subconsciously, without knowing what to say, Ryuuji had already caught up with Sumire. *How could she say goodbye like this? I won't let you run away amid your smokescreen of pretty words and sentences!* Ryuuji thought that Sumire had made everything go according to her own plan, finally abandoning that plan, then going away to build up another story that had Sumire at its center in a new world. Then what would happen to the feelings of the "pedestrians" in the old world? Did she think that as long as she refused to look at it and forgot it, she would be able to sever all connections with it?

I won't let you do that!

"...!"

As Ryuuji was concentrating on chasing after the figure that had gone into the classroom, his stomach suddenly came into contact with something warm. Looking down, he saw a mess of light-coloured hair and hair whorls. That girl had run into Ryuuji, and was trying to push him in the opposite direction.

"Tai...Taiga...!"

Bit by bit, she pushed Ryuuji back to the stairwell, and then pressed him to the wall with both of her hands. Taiga lifted her head, pinning Ryuuji's body to the wall with her hands, standing there with her legs apart. Ryuuji wanted to push the unnaturally strong arms off his body, but his hands were slapped away. The two of them stood in that position silently.

"Taiga! Why did you stop me! I'm doing this for Kitamura..."

"Kitamura-kun is crying. Go and stay by his side. Ryuuji, I'm begging you, go to him."

"Tai..."

Taiga raised her head. Ryuuji thought about whether she was crying as her long-standing crush on Kitamura shattered. Taiga, who had witnessed the confession, should be the one crying, right?

"I can't do it, I can't stay by his side."

But Taiga's eyes, the orbs that were locked onto Ryuuji had no hint of moisture in them, no wavering silver line. The pair of eyes that had understood everything now stared unblinkingly at Ryuuji.

"Are you really alright? Is it really okay for things to become like this?"

"I'm alright, don't worry."

A small smile appeared on Taiga's slightly-dry lips. Then, she took off Ryuuji's scarf from her neck, and stood on tiptoe to put the scarf back onto its rightful owner, just like that night before. The scarf was wrapped twice around Ryuuji's neck, and then an ugly knot was tied just below his chin, followed by a pat.

"I'm alright... Quickly, go to Kitamura-kun. Run, don't turn back."

"What about you? What are you going to do by yourself?"

"I'm alright by myself, I'll be with you shortly. Just go, I'm begging you."

Taiga's icy hands suddenly grabbed Ryuuji's and spun him around, as if she was making up for the dance at the campfire on the night of the cultural festival that never happened.

"Go."

Ryuuji was concerned about the sizable bulge behind Taiga's back, but before he could confirm its identity, Taiga had already pushed him forward. "Run! Don't turn back!" Although Ryuuji hesitated for a moment, he still started running, running towards his best friend, who had been completely annihilated in his battle and was crying his eyes out.

Looking at Ryuuji's receding figure, Taiga closed her eyes.

I like Kitamura. I still like him even after I've gone through the infatuation phase, the phase where I knew too much about him, and the inner turmoil

that no one else could see. Even if he likes another girl, my feelings will not change.

Kitamura is the person who held my empty hands after I had stopped in the wake of understanding the law of the universe which stated that "one will never get the very thing that one desires". He called out to me with a warm voice that completely seeped into my soul, chose me, and told me that "I want to be with Aisaka".

I'll never be able to express my gratitude towards that kind person enough. Taiga slowly opened her eyes to the empty corridor. The students had already gone into their classrooms, noisily casting their votes in the absence of the teachers.

She wished that she could be like Kitamura, but she couldn't do it. She was unable to stay by his side. The person who should be at his side wasn't her. The one he wanted wasn't her. Knowing this, Taiga was unable to stay together with him. She was afraid of being hurt, so she was unable to continue to stay by his side to face the cold, harsh reality. This was her weakness.

But no matter how weak she was, she still wanted to do what she could, just like how Kitamura treated her. Even if she couldn't hold his ice-cold hands, even if the distance between them was even larger than expected...

Up till now, the only things that Taiga had ever given Kitamura were the miserable excuse of a fried egg and the weird stuffed animal from the baseball training centre.

And now...

Taiga's right hand slowly moved towards the back of her neck, grasping the handle of the dangerous object that she had hidden in the back of her uniform, and took out the wooden sword that Ryuuji hadn't noticed. Was this the wrong thing to do? It could be the wrong thing to do, but Taiga didn't know.

She only knew that she wouldn't stop.

She was already unable to stop.

The anger that was close to boiling point had eaten up every bit of her weakness, turning it into nutrition for her rage to grow even bigger. She tasted metal on the inside of her cheek, her ragged breathing making her nostrils expand and contract unnaturally. Even though she felt a dull pain between her eyebrows, Taiga was unable to stop. Even Taiga herself could do nothing about the rampaging rage that was coursing through her veins. The rage would not disappear until she had beaten up that unforgivable woman. *Get there before this rage seeps away!* Taiga ordered her legs to speed up. *Don't trip, bring me to that woman.*

Standing in front of the classroom door, Taiga pulled it open with bone-crushing force. *Bang!* A shocking noise resounded from the door, the seniors staring at Taiga in surprise.

"KANO... SUMIRE!!!"

Her war cry held a significant trace of blood lust. "The Palmtop Tiger!?" "Why is she here!?" Taiga shouted to the noise-makers,

"I'm here to beat someone up!!! Kano Sumire, reveal yourself!!!"

One swing of the wooden sword overturned a nearby table, summoning a scream of anguish from a random student. The students quickly backed away from her, leaving an empty space around Taiga. Taiga was not going to stop until she appeared.

"That's irritating... Another one. Another idiot has appeared."

"I'm going to kill you! You hurt my friend! You Machiavellian woman! I'll never... forgive you!"

That woman casually walked into the space cleared by Taiga. Taiga swung the wooden sword forcefully, signaling to the watching students

that she would kill anyone who interfered, and pointed the edge of the sword at Sumire's nose,

"I'm never going to let you off the hook. Even if you run away, I'll chase you to the ends of the earth."

"Don't worry, who said anything about running away? Alright, I'll play."

"Bamboo sword!", Sumire called out, and a certain third-year student immediately whipped out a kendo bamboo sword that was concealed in his bag, throwing it over. Sumire caught the sword with one hand, skillfully undoing the rope tying the cloth covering the sword together,

"Running away is a form of wisdom. I think that it's correct to run away when the situation calls for it. No one can stop me if I really want to run away. But I'll give you special treatment today, so let me be your opponent. Aisaka Taiga... Let me correct your stupidity. I was just feeling annoyed at the huge number of idiots on the face of this earth. You came at the right time."

"Che!"

There is no need to show mercy to the woman that you despise! Taiga pushed the edge of the wooden sword forward into Sumire's face. Sumire jumped backwards, making eye contact with Taiga.

"Sorry, but I'm not just clever and pretty, I'm also very athletic. I'm also a black belt in both kendo and Aikido."

"That's nice'", Taiga said as she smiled. "I was worried that this would end in an instant. Looks like I can enjoy myself."

* * *

The door of the classroom was suddenly pulled open forcefully, as all the students of 2-C turned in the direction of the door in surprise. Inside was a silent Kitamura, who still had his head bowed, Ryuuji, who was sitting beside him, attempting to cheer him up, Noto, Haruta, Maya and Nanako, who had left everything to the boys to solve, Minori, who was preparing to look for her best friend in the toilet, and Ami.

"Where's the delinquent Takasu!? Come and help us!"

"Huh?"

A few breathless third-year girls stood at the classroom door. After seeing Ryuuji, they immediately ran to him and forcefully dragged him away.

"Huh!? What's happening?"

"Your friend, the Palmtop Tiger, went to our class to challenge Kano to a duel! Now everything's a mess!"

Huh? I don't understand, could you repeat that? Although his brain thought that, his body had already jumped up. Without any encouragement from the senior girls, Ryuuji flew out of the classroom.

"Hey, we're going too!"

"Takasu won't be able to solve this by himself!"

"What's that tiger trying to do!"

Ryuuji didn't see his classmates running out behind him as he ran up the stairs shouting "What is that idiot trying to do!?" He didn't need to think to know which classroom it was. All he had to do was to look for the source of the cries of anguish, and the people at the door of the classroom who were either running away or joining the crowd...

"Move! Excuse me! Let me through! Taiga!"

"Ah! Takasu joined the fight!" someone shouted. Ryuuji pushed him away, finally reaching the scene of the duel. In the middle of the classroom, amid fallen furniture and school materials...

"You, you big idiot!!!"

Sumire slashed down on Taiga with her bamboo sword, hitting the wooden sword out of her hands. Taiga calmly gave up her weapon, moving close to her in an instant clenching her fists,

"Idiot idiot idiot idiot, that's all you've been saying since just now!"

"Gah!"

A punch hit Sumire squarely on the chin, her head moving upwards with the force. As her chin came back down...

"Ah!"

Taiga let fly another punch, hitting her chin in the opposite direction. The stunned Sumire dropped her bamboo blade, looking as though she was going to fall. But Taiga showed no mercy as she crouched down, preparing for yet another attack.

"Ka!"

"Ah!?"

Taiga's jacket had been pulled back by a pair of hands. In that seemingly-magical moment, Taiga's small body received a kick from Sumire and flew into the air, landing straight down. Sumire crushed Taiga under her body as she prepared for the countdown, but her face was full of blood. Taiga rolled into a ball to avoid being squashed by Sumire, her face also full of blood. The blood made both of their grips slippery, and gave the advantage to Taiga in this round, as she grabbed Sumire's hand which had slipped off, switching positions with Sumire in an instant as she gave a primitive animalistic warcry, pulling on her hair and raising her fist.

"Don't do it... Stop! You shouldn't be fighting! STOP!!!"

Minori was the one who shouted. Ryuuji also rushed to stop Minori, who had moved between the two fighters in a bid to separate them and stop the fight. If she got involved in the fight as well, Ryuuji's problems would be severely compounded.

"Stop, Kushieda!"

Ryuuji shouted to the person who was holding Minori in place and ran towards Taiga.

"Roarrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!"

He grabbed Taiga's enraged body from behind, keeping her arms in place with all his strength. But Taiga had no idea whose pair of hands it was as she screamed and struggled to break free. Even though she knew that Taiga had been subdued by Ryuuji, Sumire still took the opportunity to knee Taiga in the stomach and hit her in the face. Now Ryuuji had to protect Taiga's face from harm. He shouted for Sumire to stop while rolling onto the ground with Taiga in his arms. Taiga struggled to get up, while the hand that Sumire was using to grab at her collar was devoid of the cold, harsh reasoning that was associated with the student council president.

Someone grabbed Sumire's arm. A few others took the opportunity to drag her away from Taiga.

"Let go of me!!! I'm going to punish this stupid tiger!!!"

Sumire's screams stung Ryuuji's ears.

"What did you say!? Who're you going to punish!? Whatwhatwhatwhatwhatwhat are you trying to say!? Punish me!? Who do you think you are! You're only a coward!"

"What did you say!?" Sumire prepared to stand up again, but Kitamura frantically held her hand in place. Taiga shouted in an even higher voice,

"All you do is boast! All you do is to pretend to be a saint! You're afraid of being hurt, and afraid of hurting others! Your cowardice and cunning hurt Kitamura-kun! I'll never forgive you! NE-VER-FOR-GIVE-YOU!"

Taiga, who was held tightly by Ryuuji, continued to kick wildly while shouting at the same time,

"Coward! Despicable! You don't have the guts to face your own feelings! Coward-Coward-Coward-Coward-Coward-Coward-Coward-Coward!"

"I'm alright with being a coward. You're just a violent maniac!"

"At least that's better than an escaped criminal such as you! Say it! If you don't want to accept Kitamura-kun's feelings, then say that you hate him! Say it! Say it!!!"

"SHUT UP!!!!!!"

Sumire jumped up, intending to kick Taiga, but one of her indoor shoes instead flew straight to Taiga's face. Taiga shielded her face with her hands, instinctively rolling up. Sumire said breathlessly,

"I... I can't lie! That's why... I didn't say anything!"

Sumire changed tactics, taking off her other indoor shoe and throwing it, missing her target.

"You... Aisaka... What do you know!? What do you know about me!? I would be glad to be a naive idiot like you if I could! I also want to be an idiot! I also want to become an idiot and run straight ahead without thinking of the consequences...!"

Her sobs becoming hoarse, Sumire continued as she bent down,

"If I said that I liked him... after I say that! That idiot would surely want to follow me...! If he knew that I wished for him to do that, he would surely do it for me! He would surely give up on many things for me! He's that kind of person! Thats why... That's why! That's why I can't be an idiot!"

As she twisted her body painfully, tears that were even thicker than the blood on her face flowed down from the perfect face of the student council president. Sumire shook her head roughly, looking as if she didn't want to admit that she was crying, but no matter how hard she shook her head, the tears didn't stop flowing, nor did the words and feelings that she had conveyed stop. Twisting her face, her hoarse throat continuing to shout, crying out her innermost thoughts,

"I also... want to... be an idiot...! But... no matter... how hard... I try... I... can't... do... it..."

Why hadn't they noticed this before? Kano Sumire was just another eighteen year-old kid.

Ryuuji thought to himself. *Everyone present here are kids, and this wasn't a problem of being stupid or not. It's because everyone of us are kids that we can only scream and cry when our path doesn't take us to the place we want to go. It's always been like this.*

The situation had become so bad that the teachers had intervened to clean up the mess.

Someone looked closely at Sumire's face to check the extent of her injuries, and someone else grasped the wrist of Taiga, who was similarly injured. Ryuuji instinctively reached out to grab her hand back, but after seeing the stare from that person, Ryuuji and Taiga's hands merely briefly made contact in mid-air before separating. Taiga was forcefully brought out of the classroom to another place.

The crowd continued to stand there, not knowing what to do...

"The president's too kind."

"Kita..."

"I like you from the bottom of my heart! Meeting you was the best thing that has ever happened to me! To be able to like you... It was really good

to be able to fall in love with you! I don't regret it at all! Thank you for everything!"

The two of them looked at each other with tear-stained faces. Kitamura bowed deeply, as though he was about to let go of everything. He whispered to himself, "Goodbye." and followed after the violent person who had been forcefully taken away out of the classroom. Someone had to explain the situation.

The teacher who was preparing to send Sumire to the nurse looked at Ryuuji's face. Whether it was the result of Taiga's flailing, or the result of trying to protect Taiga from Sumire's attacks, Ryuuji hadn't noticed that his lips were cracked, and had numerous scratches on his face. Ryuuji would probably also be sent to the nurse.

After everyone who was directly involved in the fight had left, only the students of 2-C who didn't belong in the third-year classroom were left. "Should we help to clean up?" Someone hesitantly bent down, and suddenly found...

"Hmm... A student handbook?"

"Whose is it?"

To confirm the identity of its owner, the handbook was opened in the presence of everyone. "Aisaka Taiga" was written on the cover page.

"It's Taiga's... She must have dropped it earlier."

"Help her keep it, don't lose it. Takasu-kun... Ah, right."

"Can someone take it to her first?"

"Ah."

They hadn't intended to peek, and were going to close the handbook after confirming the identity of its owner, but a large chunk of sticky tape was stuck to the hand of the person who had opened the handbook. Everyone

accidentally saw the inside of the cover, just like that, and fell into silent contemplation.

A photograph had been carefully stuck on the inside of the cover. Everyone saw it. It was the picture of the two of them dancing on the night of the cultural festival. And then everyone understood that the memory was so precious to Taiga that she hoped to carry it by her side all the time.

That's right, so important that even after Kitamura was rejected, she still came to beat the other person up.

"She really, likes him..."

It wasn't a rumour, nor was it a joke. A young girl's feelings of love were out in the open. The person who was holding the handbook suddenly noticed that there was another photo below the one from the dance.

"I'll take care of this for now."

The handbook was snatched away before the second photo could be confirmed. The person that stuffed Taiga's handbook into her pocket while wearing a slightly depressed smile, looking like a wise angel, was Ami.

"Come, let's all help to clean up... To all the seniors, I'm extremely sorry about this incident, the tiger from our class is just too..."

"No, it's not Kawashima's fault."

"Right, don't worry, cheer up!"

The situation would become like this with a bat of Ami's delicate eyelashes. The students of 2-C helped their seniors clear up the mess. Only one person stood motionless, her eyes scrunched up into a line.

The usual cheerful smile had disappeared from Minori's face as she seemed to be deep in thought. She seemed as if she had suddenly thought of something, then wrinkled her eyebrows to try to forget something, and then shook her head. Looking at her, Ami seemed to understand what was going on.

Ami made a move to get up, but thought better of it, instead crouching back down to continue tidying the notes that were scattered on the floor. But she noticed the weight of the student handbook in her pocket, and stopped what she was doing once again, thinking of that person's usual actions. Ami also stood up expressionless like Minori. She won't sympathize with her! Although she didn't sympathize...

"..."

Ami went over to Minori soundlessly, like a cat, and whispered into her ear,

"Has your sense of guilt disappeared yet?"

"Huh...?"

Minori turned around, her eyes wide with surprise. Looking at Minori's shocked expression, Ami regretted saying that, her chest suddenly feeling heavier, but she didn't want Minori to find out. Ami left Minori standing there, and snuck out of the third-year classroom without anyone noticing.

She ran along the corridor and down the stairs to the gap between the two vending machines.

"...!"

After slotting herself into her usual hideaway, *Bang!* Ami banged her head onto the wall.

She'd said something stupid. If only she hadn't said it. Was she intending to trigger something big by saying that? She had wanted to become a better person, which was something she had tried so hard to do, but was unable to. *Bang! Bang!* She banged her head on the wall twice more.

That's right.

It wasn't just sympathy, for there was also a certain degree of jealousy, and a myriad of other...emotions mixed together, so much so that she

didn't know what to do anymore. She didn't know what she wanted to do, and didn't understand, as she couldn't do it correctly.

She wasn't able to make her wish come true. She was unable to change, to become the person that she wanted to be.

The uncomfortable noise of a head hitting a wall sounded three more times.

Minori was dazed, her hands full of cuts from a broken vase.

Although the doctors had initially thought that Sumire might have a broken nose, X-ray scans showed that her nasal bone was not broken, owing to her shockingly high bone density. Her face was as bruised as Kitamura's had been a while ago, and she went through her last day of school with that face, bidding goodbye to her status as a high school student amid an overwhelming wave of flowers, then flying to America two days later.

Kitamura had displaced Ryuuji as the number one "pitiful guy" in the school. He also got the position of student council president.

Ryuuji had to go to school with a face that was more terrifying than normal. Although his injuries weren't serious, his face made him look like a gangster who had just gotten out of jail. For some unknown reason, Yasuko was extremely excited when Ryuuji arrived home with that kind of a face...

Taiga had gotten suspended from school for two weeks. Although she should have been expelled, Sumire's parents expressed their opinion that since Sumire had fought too, it would be extremely unfair for the school to let Sumire go overseas but expel Taiga. They would not allow Sumire to go overseas if Taiga was expelled, so Taiga had gotten an extremely light sentence. Throughout all this, the guardian from the Aisaka side did not appear in person, only conversing through his secretary. Taiga also went with the single woman to the supermarket that the Kano family owned to apologise, and obtained their forgiveness. On their way home, they met the worried Takasu mother and son.

The single woman, who had not smoked for eight years, took out a cigarette, etching another permanent wrinkle into her forehead.

Orion was still shining brightly above them.

* * *

Ryuuji arrived home from a Taiga-less school, but didn't see any sign of Yasuko in the apartment, thinking that she probably went to the convenience store. So he went to his room to hang up his uniform.

Opening the window to look over to Taiga's bedroom, "That idiot." Ryuuji softly admonished. Although it was already winter, the windows and curtains of Taiga's room were still open, and it seemed like Taiga was still sleeping. Ryuuji was unable to see the whole of her bedroom from his vantage point, and as such could only infer from the relaxed foot hanging from the side of the bed.

"Ah... Isn't she cold?"

Ryuuji decided to wake her up by calling her cell phone, but there didn't seem to be the sound of a cell phone coming from Taiga's room. She was suspended from school to reflect on her mistakes, and yet she's taking an afternoon nap... She was way too casual about it.

Ryuuji stuck his head out of the window, shouting across the space between the two buildings, taking care not to disturb the neighbours, "Hey! You'll catch a cold like this! Close the window if you want to sleep!" In response, Taiga's foot flipped over, but she didn't seem to be getting up. Ryuuji could only think to leave her alone.

"She's so lazy..."

But almost immediately, Ryuuji thought of the fact that he'd have to take care of Taiga if she fell sick, so Ryuuji went out of the apartment, still in his

uniform. *She should wake up if I press her doorbell, right? If she wakes up, then I'll get her to go shopping with me. There should be a special sale on fish today.*

Ryuuji entered the marble entrance and pressed on Taiga's doorbell repeatedly. As his left hand jabbed at the button madly, Ryuuji realized that his scarf had once again been taken away by Taiga. *Though I want her to return it to me, would I be able to endure her "so cold, so cold attack"?*

At that very moment, the scarf in question was currently wrapped around Taiga's shoulders. Actually, Taiga was already awake, as she finally couldn't take the incessant attacks of the doorbell and sat up.

The elasticity of the mattress pushed the stack of paper that was on the edge of the bed off onto the floor. It was the letter of apology that the school had ordered Taiga to write, and two postcards.

The postcards were from the single woman, to which she responded, "the school didn't ask for this...". One was to be sent to Kano Sumire in America to apologise, and the other was to be sent to the single woman, with no restrictions on the content of the postcard. It would have been too childish to write nothing or to simply draw a disgusting skull, so she decided not to write anything but to paint the postcard with one single colour.

Taiga laid on her bed trying to decide what kind of colour to paint the postcard with, as she looked out at the sky and clouds from her open window, and then shifted her gaze to Ryuuji's window.

She still had not decided on what colour to use.

* * *

On a certain day, a postcard found its way to the small room that Kano Sumire and her friends rented. There was no name written on it, but the identity of the sender was obvious once the other side of the postcard was read.

Only one word was written on the back of the postcard - "Idiot".

Sumire, who hadn't been in the best of spirits since arriving in America, suddenly stood up and laughed loudly, like a middle-aged man, shocking her roommates into dropping their lunchboxes.

Author's notes

On Friday night at eight, I was at a family restaurant, having initially worried "Would there be enough space for me since it's dinner time?", but there weren't many customers in the shop. There aren't many people who would go to a family restaurant on a weekend to eat dinner...even though the food is tasty...and even though it's very convenient...and even though there's a drink-all-you-can drink bar... Even though I'm like this, I'm good at my work. I'm Takemiya Yuyuko... I would even spread cod eggs onto toast...and then spread a layer of cream before topping it off with seaweed...

Back to the topic. To everyone who has bought *Toradora 6!*, and to everyone who has walked with me all the way, I thank each and everyone of you from the bottom of my heart! The useless and immature me has hit volume 6! It is by the support of everyone for this series that I have been able to write so much! It would be my greatest pleasure to know that everyone has had fun reading this!

Other than that, there's a very bad thing I have to tell everyone, as I've heard that this book could possibly be my last work of my twenties. If everyone supports the next book as well, then I'll be thir...ty by the time we meet right? That's a real possibility. So how? What do we do? Sigh, I don't know what to do either...

Even then, I have already mentally prepared myself to a certain extent to step into the world of the thirty year-olds. Because the topic of discussion with the female friends of my generation recently have always been 'insurance', 'cancer detection', 'inheritance', 'interest rates', 'yearly income', 'ballooning general price levels', 'the next big incident, accident'... Ah, there's still celebrity marriages, divorces, having kids, etc. Even though we don't know them personally, we comment extensively on their partners. Whether the ceremony was impressive or not, whether their clothes were weird or not, whether the food at their wedding looked delicious or not... We would be able to talk for hours without touching alcohol. Does this mean we're completely gone? Even I can't defend myself. I unconditionally

surrender to the process of aging. To let time flow by without resisting, employing the tactics of the Takeda clan - to be as empty as the wind, to be as fragile as wood, to be burn up like fire, and to be as fat as a mountain. This is the Hurinkazan of us women! I'll pay for my own funeral with my insurance payout!

I even bought skin-coloured old women underwear! It cost me four thousand yen, so expensive! But the cheap old women underwear isn't warm enough for women who are getting on in their years, and even cause intense itchiness! My body requires high quality old women underwear!

That's about it, and I hope that everyone would continue to support the next book, *Toradora 7! ~Yuyuko's thirty years-old~*. Thank you for reading all the way to the end! And to the editors and Yasu-sensei, please continue to take care of this old woman...

Takemiya Yuyuko

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